

“Nailing it Across the Board”: Negotiating Identity as Trades Teachers

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Abstract: A vocational identity of teacher has been linked in research to teaching efficacy, job satisfaction, and commitment to the profession. For postsecondary college instructors, teaching is most often a second career, with the first career providing the subject matter expertise that is the foundation of the second. The first career also carries an established vocational identity, leading to a negotiation of that concept with the new identity of teacher. This article presents recent doctoral research exploring vocational identity among postsecondary trades teachers in Western Canada. The exploratory mixed-methods study found the two identities of tradesperson and teacher were interconnected, with teaching seen by study participants as part of being a journey person, and the identity of tradesperson seen as essential to teaching in vocational education. An understanding of this negotiated interconnection provides insight for colleges in the hiring, training, and retention of trades teachers.

Keywords: Education, Post-Secondary, Trades, Teachers Vocational Identity

Introduction

The question of vocational identity follows us throughout life, from childhood speculation on what to be when you grow up to defining yourself in adulthood. One vocational identity that is often considered by children and sometimes chosen by adults is that of teacher. Primary and secondary school teachers often enter the profession as a first career, following lengthy university preparation. In higher education settings, teachers are selected primarily for their subject-matter expertise, often established by certification and years of work experience within an established vocational identity, in a first career before teaching.

One piece in the much-researched puzzle of what enables good teaching (e.g., Allen, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2012; Sadler, 2013) is that of professional or vocational identity. Perceptions of identity can affect teacher efficacy and ability to cope with change (Beijaard, Verloop & Vermunt, 2000). Farnworth and Higham (2012) linked identity as a teacher to job fulfillment, motivation, commitment, and sense of effectiveness, and these factors have been connected to effective teaching (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). A well-formed vocational identity has been linked to job and life satisfaction (Hirschi, 2011; Peterson, Park & Seligman, 2005), suggesting that identity could affect attrition, since dissatisfaction could lead to career abandonment.

In this article, I report on recent research exploring effective trades teaching, conducted among teachers of apprenticeship trades at three Western Canadian colleges. The study looked at the transition from trades practice to teaching by examining motivation, competencies, satisfaction in the new role, and vocational identity. Identity was found to be interconnected between the first and second career – in the words of one study participant, “nailing it across the board” – and became an explanatory factor for other study results.

Literature Review

Vocational Identity

Vocational identity was defined by Marcia (1980) as a clear identification with a particular occupation or vocation, based on commitment following active exploration of possible identities. Creating a vocational identity is a part of overall identity formation throughout life stages that include competence in childhood and generativity in adulthood, including a desire to see one’s work continue to the next generation (Erikson, 1980). Vocational identity is also linked to the Aristotelian idea of eudemonia (Wheelwright, 1951) or happiness through use of one’s gifts, and to Maslow’s (1962) concept of self-actualization.

Simpson (1967), Graves (1989), and Schulman (2005b) envisioned vocational identity as made up of three parts: technical knowledge; acceptance into the occupational role through learning and demonstrating skills; and, establishment of an internalized sense of belonging with the vocation that sets the newcomer

apart from others as a member of the occupational group. Lave and Wenger (1991) theorized a centripetal process toward vocational identity within a community of practice. Korthagen (2004), in research on teacher identity, used the circular model of an onion's layers to explain identity development, suggesting identity is built upon knowledge; then skills upon knowledge; then attitudes and other traits built upon this knowledge and skills; and finally, the creation of a full identity. This vocational identity becomes an integral part of the overall identity of the person, such that one will see oneself, and name oneself, by that vocation.

The occupational identity of postsecondary vocational teachers is formed in a different manner than for teachers in other settings. Elementary and secondary teachers, who often choose teaching as a first career, train through extended study for that career and may undergo a planned induction into the profession (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). By contrast, the majority of postsecondary teachers are, first and foremost, subject-matter experts who become teachers of their subject (Dennison & Gallagher, 1986; Grubb, 1999). Among the vocational education teachers who participated in the current study, 85% indicated no formal teacher training before being hired as a teacher. They were thrust into the sudden responsibility of teaching (Lortie, 1975) without preparation or induction.

Vocational Identity of Trades Teachers

Postsecondary vocational teachers bring a well-established first-career identity, along with subject-matter expertise, upon moving into teaching. The strength of this prior identity may be even greater for those who teach trades than for other subject experts. Farnworth and Higham (2012), studying Canadian teachers, found evidence of identity based on a community of practice within subject specialization for teachers overall, but for vocational teachers "prior trade specialism . . . emerged as a key influence on their identities as teachers" (p. 479).

Haycock and Kelly (2009) took the view that maintaining that first identity is necessary for trades teachers:

Practitioners are intended by policy initiatives . . . to have the dual occupational identities which include those associated with their previous industry fields of practice, experience and expertise in trade areas, and that of teacher. These dual identities are then supposed to converge in what we perceive to be a somewhat Janus-faced occupational identity. (p. 4)

Chappell and Johnston (2003) suggested a dual identity is an important part of the overall identity for trades teachers, and what distinguishes these educators from school teachers or university lecturers whose initial careers are often in education; however, establishing an equilibrium of the two identities is not simple. Chappell (1999) explained this characteristic further, saying: "[trades] teachers believe that their legitimacy as teachers, particularly in the eyes of students, is dependent on their industrial expertise. . . . [Trades] teachers use their industrial experience to construct a sense of who they are in the educational project" (p. 218).

Having a sense of legitimacy as a trades teacher requires currency within ever-changing industrial expertise; yet, staying abreast of changes is difficult as the tradesperson is now distanced from industry by the new primary role of teaching. Working under the scrutiny of supervisors, as well as students who may be industry workers themselves, any lack of currency in industrial knowledge leads to uncertainty in the trades teacher's identity (Chappell, 1999). Haycock and Kelly (2009) also saw the first identity as disruptive to the trades teacher's present and future occupational identity as teacher; yet, separation from the first identity is not possible if connection to that vocation is required to establish identity in the second role.

Negotiating Identities

Negotiating a Janus-faced identity (Haycock & Kelly, 2009) appears to be part of the process in becoming a trades teacher. The new teacher has already held a position of expertise within a trade, with an established occupational identity. This identity is more deeply embedded than just competencies and behaviours

(Graves, 1989; Simpson, 1967). Becoming a trades teacher leads this person through a transitional phase, which again requires more than just learning competencies or behaviours, toward an embedded sense of occupational identity, beliefs, and a sense of mission about teaching (Korthagen, 2004).

Mealyea (1988) termed this transition from tradesperson to teacher a “resocialization” (p. 12), affected by societal expectations on an individual’s career path, vocational identity formation in adolescence, and entry to a new career as a mature student. In his narrative study of a cohort of Australian tradespeople training to become trades teachers, Mealyea (1988) described a group that maintained its connection to industry, as demonstrated through speech patterns and exclusive association within their small peer group, rather than mixing into the larger teacher trainee group: “They entered teaching with, and managed to sustain, a commonly-held industrial orientation toward their new occupation” (p. 441). He termed the experience of teacher training for this cohort “largely dysfunctional” (p. 443) due to the reinforcement of the original vocational identity by the group members and by some college lecturers with similar orientations. Mealyea (1988) suggested an enforced mixing of occupational groups within the college’s classes, and more contact with other subject-matter teachers, could have challenged their view of themselves and of the role of trades teacher; such a challenge to vocational identity, while unsettling, may have sparked reflection and strengthened the teacher identity.

Maurice-Takerei and Jesson (2010) found the Australian trades teachers of their study identified occupationally as both carpenters and teachers; they suggested clarifying a *signature pedagogy* (Schulman, 2005a) of trades teaching, and recognition of this distinctive form of teaching, could strengthen the identity of trades teachers. Andersson et al. (2013) found differences in identity among adult educators, with those whose subject matter expertise came from a vocation or profession with a strong identity, such as with trades, tending to remain on the periphery of the adult education community of practice.

Methodology of the Current Study

Given the relatively scant research in the specific field of trades education, I chose an exploratory mixed-methods approach for my study. Using a constructivist approach to create a qualitative dominant crossover mixed analysis (Frels & Onwuegbuzie, 2013) gave voice to the self-defined reality of the participants. An electronic survey was created that adapted portions of previous similar surveys conducted among teachers, although not trades teachers specifically (Berger & D’Ascoli, 2012; Dainty, 2012; Hong, 2010; Ruhland, 2001; Simmons, 2009; Watt & Richardson, 2007). This new instrument was used to gather input from trades teachers ($N = 165$) at three Western Canadian colleges. This phase was followed by interpretation panels (Noonan, 2002) to explain the quantitative results and add further qualitative data.

The survey was conducted in June 2014. The quantitative data were analyzed via statistical analysis software, with manual coding of qualitative survey data. The results of this analysis were shared with those participants who had indicated a willingness to be a part of interpretation panels and had provided contact information in the survey. In September through November 2014, interpretation panels were conducted with participants ($N = 12$) at the three colleges. Results were transcribed, member checked, and manually coded. Final analysis by the researcher looked for triangulation within the sets of results.

Vocational identity was one portion of a larger research question in this study, exploring the transition of trades practitioners moving to teaching of their trade. A single question within the survey asked: *Are you a tradesperson, a teacher, or both? If you met someone for the first time today, how would you describe yourself to this person?* Respondents could choose one or more of three options: *I’m a tradesperson; I’m a teacher; I’m a teacher in my trade.* A comments option was also provided.

Research Findings

Survey Results

Multiple and missing responses to the question on identity were expected; results were recorded as frequency counts, including a count of null data points, shown in Table 1 below. Among those responding to the statement *I’m a tradesperson*, 69.9% agreed. To the statement *I’m a teacher*, 73.6% of those

responding agreed. In response to *I'm a teacher in my trade*, 96.6% agreed. For each statement, a majority of those responding agreed; however, the strongest level of identification was with teacher in my trade. Comments provided within the survey spoke to pride in both identities, saying "I am both, I am a tradesperson who can teach," and "I have both a degree and a Red Seal (national trades certification)."

Table 1.1 Vocational Identity Frequency Counts and Missing Data for All Respondents

Statement	Agree	Disagree	Null	Total
<i>I'm a tradesperson</i>	86	37	42	165
<i>I'm a teacher/instructor</i>	92	33	40	165
<i>I'm a teacher/instructor in my trade</i>	140	5	20	165

Variations in identity. In analysis of the survey results, significant differences were found through chi-square testing according to two demographic factors: previous teacher training and the presence of another teacher in the family. Of those surveyed, 15% indicated formal teacher training prior to becoming a teacher. Using this demographic factor to compare results for *I'm a teacher* resulted in $\chi^2(1, N = 125) = 5.926, p = .015$. Respondents with some formal teacher training were more likely to see themselves as teachers (95.0%) as compared to those with no formal teacher training (68.6%). Chi-square testing was also used to examine associations according to the presence of another teacher in the immediate family, a factor indicated by one third of respondents. For *I'm a tradesperson*, $\chi^2(1, N = 123) = 3.997, p = .046$. Respondents who indicated having a teacher within their immediate family were more likely to see themselves as tradespeople (82.1%) than those who indicated no teacher within the family (64.3%).

Change in vocational identity by experience. Survey results were also analyzed according to experience level, dividing participants into five subgroups: Novice, 3 years or less experience, ($n = 35$); Junior, 4-7 years, ($n = 32$); Intermediate, 8-11 years, ($n = 31$); Senior, 12-17 years, ($n = 31$); and Veteran, 18 years or more experience, ($n = 36$). Differences between groups were not statistically significant. The percentage level of agreement among those responding, for each experience level, is represented in Figure 1 below. *Teacher in my trade* drew the strongest agreement in all experience groups. The strength of agreement to *teacher* and *tradesperson* varied across the groups.

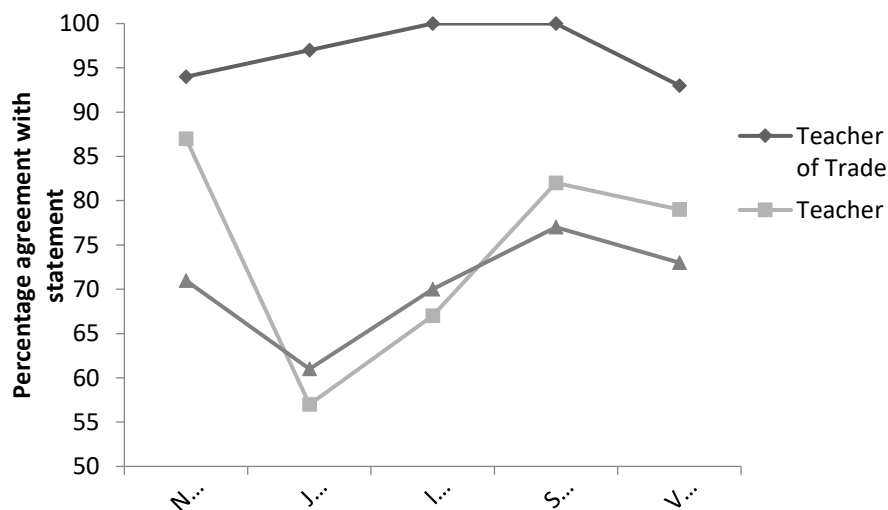


Figure 1. Vocational identity by experience groups, percentage agreement among those responding.

Qualitative Results

The pattern of finding identity in both roles was repeated, and expanded, in the interpretation panel discussions. Participants expressed enjoyment of both trades practice and teaching and suggested that the first forms a natural link to the second, as teaching is part of the historic practice of trades (Coy, 1989). One participant phrased it this way:

I think it's a twofold thing. If you ask me, if I meet someone out on the street and I tell them what do I do, do I tell them I'm a teacher? No. Do I tell them I'm an electrician? No. I tell them I'm an electrician instructor. That is nailing it across the board.

One participant commented "In the trades, we're teaching. We're teaching all the time," while another said "I was all the time on the tools, but all the time I was teaching and sharing with someone else . . . It's always been part and parcel [of the trades]." In addition to the teaching experience gained while in the trade, participants expressed the idea of being "naturally born to teach." One trades teacher commented that working with apprentices may make the transition to teaching easier for tradespeople than for other vocational teachers:

You have to be a certain person. As tradespeople, we probably mentored somebody, so it's another step. And some of us slide into the step a little easier. But for the electronics and technology [teachers], they don't use that [teaching process].

In contrast to their concept of the tradesperson as teacher, however, participants expressed a strong sense that their employing institutions equated teacher to specific credentials, such as a Bachelor of Education degree, and their experiences of teaching apprentices were not recognized in the college setting.

One panel participant saw a change occurring over a teaching career, linked to the transition from workplace to college culture: "you are moving from blue [collar] to white. You are becoming part of the white." He suggested colleges need to force the issue to some extent, using professional development sessions to "push forward this idea that you're not a tradesman any more, you're a teacher, and this is what we want from you. We want you to develop skills as a teacher, and your trade is secondary."

Discussion

The quantitative results demonstrated the dual identity held by the trades teachers surveyed; the qualitative data of the survey and interpretation panels conveyed the strong sense among participants that the identity of *teacher* was established for them within trades practice long before they took on the formal title. The idea of a pre-existing teaching identity helped explain not only the results of the specific question on identity, but other aspect of the transition, as well.

When asked about motivation to change careers, survey participants chose *an opportunity to share my knowledge of the trade* (95.8%) most often, evoking the motivation of continuity in teaching (Lortie, 1975). Several panel participants said they had considered the move to full-time teaching for a long time prior to changing, based on their enjoyment of working with apprentices, suggesting this was not a second career but a second phase of an ongoing career.

Pre-existing identification as *teacher* also enriched the understanding of self-rated competencies, as survey results showed strong self confidence in many aspects of teaching, with the exception of pedagogical knowledge, even among Novice teachers and those without previous training. Interpretation panel results also linked identity to job satisfaction, showing the pre-existing *teacher* identity was not supported in the college setting, leading to a sense of dissatisfaction and lack of support. Participants described mandatory new teacher training as highly academic and dismissive of the teaching role within trades.

The effect of other people's views on vocational identity was shown, not only in comments regarding lack of recognition for teaching within trades, but through statistical analysis of the survey responses.

Having another teacher within the immediate family was linked to increased agreement to *I'm a tradesperson*, possibly due to the more typical teacher identity being contrasted to that of tradesperson or trades teacher. Formal teacher training was linked to increased agreement with the statement *I'm a teacher*, perhaps a reflection of the vocational identity developed during that training period. Further research would be needed to explore these differences.

Identity Negotiation Over Time

Previous research (Haycock & Kelly, 2009; Mealyea, 1988, 1989) focused on the development of identity for tradespeople as they first moved to a teaching role, reporting dissonance and anger in making this change; in this study, trades teachers of varying experience were surveyed, with no significant difference found in identity between experience groups. This result suggests that trades teachers may reach a balance between the two identities over time, or that identity was less divided when viewed within a larger group and over time.

Identity appeared to become more integrated as the years of experience increased. The statement *I'm a teacher in my trade* peaked as a percentage in the Intermediate and Senior groups. *I'm a teacher* showed the highest percentage agreement among Novices, and lowest among Junior and Intermediate teachers. While not statistically significant differences, these variations show the first years of teaching for trades teachers, as with teachers generally, are often a time of negotiation of the role (Chang, 2009; Falk, 2012; Grissmer & Kirby, 1987; E. M. Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). The identities were most closely aligned among Veteran teachers, suggesting negotiation occurs over time.

Development of Identity

The identity of *teacher* appears to be embedded within the identity of *tradesperson* for most participants in this study; they see themselves as comfortably both teacher and tradesperson and proudly say they are teachers of their trade. The data support Simpson's (1967) concept of a phase in vocational identity development in which a novice is accepted into the group. Within the current study, however, the reference set appeared limited to the very specific category of trades teachers, and the outsiders include other teachers in the institution.

Graves (1989) presented a similar theory of vocational identity formation including: anticipatory socialization; learning technical requirements for practice; and full acceptance into the vocation through a "them and us" distinction and the ability to pass on gained knowledge. The current research supported this theory, as well. A level of anticipatory socialization was shown in the strong agreement with *I am a teacher* among Novices. The ability to pass on knowledge was seen by participants in the current study as part of teaching as a journey person, a motivation for teaching, and as something to be developed as one moves from tradesperson to teacher of a trade. For the majority of this study's participants, teacher training occurred through mandatory, post-hiring programs, but these programs may undermine the initial sense of being a teacher as the person compares this self-identity to the presented ideal of an academically trained teacher. A clear "them and us" was also shown; however, for this group, the vocation was *teacher in my trade*, rather than *teacher*.

Making Identity Work

Chappell and Johnston (2003) suggested a dual identity is important for trades teachers, and what distinguishes them from school teachers or university lecturers, an idea that was supported by the findings of the current research where a clear sense of division between trades teachers and other teachers was apparent. If continued identification with the trade is psychologically necessary to provide a sense of legitimacy in teaching the trade, a dual or inclusive identity may be the best choice. As described by study participants, there is a need to move beyond the trade, of "moving from blue [collar] to white" and to take on the work of embracing the professionalism and theory of teaching. Yet, rather than seeing a re-socialization and change to full identification as *teacher* as necessary for trades teachers (Andersson et al., 2013; Mealyea, 1988), perhaps the "Janus-faced occupational identity" suggested by Haycock and Kelly (2009, p. 4) is the best – if somewhat complicated – choice to support continued teaching in the

trades. This identity appeared to be the one negotiated by participants to this study, expressed in almost unanimous agreement to the statement *I'm a teacher in my trade*.

Conclusion

The one question on vocational identity within this study provided only a glimpse into the complex negotiation of respondents' self-concepts. The results suggested that the identities of tradesperson and teacher were interconnected, with the concept of *teacher* embedded within the tradition of trades, and the identity of tradesperson embedded and necessary within being a trades teacher. The process of reaching a negotiated new identity was affected by the views of others within the trades teacher's family, teacher training, and the actions of the employing institution, sometimes in a negative way.

Understanding the occupational roles as interconnected, rather than distinct, not only helped explain the seemingly ambiguous results of the question on vocational identity, but also offered understanding on other questions including motivation, self-rating of competencies, and satisfaction factors. Given the delimitations of this study, further research is needed to explore the definition and effects of vocational identity in this educational setting; however, the results suggest some ways in which an understanding of identity could be used by colleges toward effective teaching by recruitment of motivated teachers, building commitment and a sense of effectiveness, and reducing attrition through job satisfaction.

Recognition of the teacher identity within trades practice could be utilized in college teacher recruitment, offering an opportunity to continue this aspect of the first vocation in a new setting to those tradespeople who have found previous satisfaction in this role. Fostering an ongoing connection to industry for current trades teachers, through policies that allow for industry sabbaticals and continued training in the trade, could support a sense of legitimacy as a trades teacher (Chappell, 1999), continuity as a motivation for teaching (Lortie, 1975), subject-matter currency, and the dual identity of *teacher in my trade*.

In providing post-hiring teacher training of tradespeople, colleges could recognize the teacher identity within apprenticeship rather than focusing on an academic and credential-based teacher identity. A thoughtful bridging between teaching within trades and within the college via training specifically designed for trades teachers, building on the idea of a *signature pedagogy* within apprenticeship, recognizing prior learning, and utilizing learning practices associated with trades, such as mentoring, could assist new trades teachers to negotiate the identity shift.

More generally, recognition of the importance of trades and trades teachers within colleges, through policies and processes specific to the needs of this area of study, could foster pride and a strong identity. A solid vocational identity, encompassing both the new and the previous role, can be linked to job effectiveness and satisfaction. These factors, in turn, may reduce attrition and help colleges keep those who have negotiated the new identity in the role of *teacher in my trade*.

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