Service Learning As A Means To Develop Geography Graduates' Professional Identity.

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Abstract

This paper explores, at university level, the value of a service learning approach to teaching and learning rural geography to develop students' awareness of a professional identity. Drawing on theories of service learning as experiential learning, and the construction of professional identities in practice-based contexts, it explores how the service learning (practice-and inquiry-based) process can enhance students' capacities to identify themselves as rural geography professionals. In particular, the paper explores how service learning contributes to raising students' awareness via reflective exercises about the contribution of their geographical knowledge and skills to local development problem-solving. The paper uses a case study example of a service learning module run as part of a Master's in Rural Sustainability programme. The evidence accrues from ten of these Master's students working with two locally-based development organisations situated in a rural market town and their efforts to devise and assess a project's feasibility to contribute to the town's development needs. Overall, the paper adds to the knowledge of how professional identity is formed through practice and, how this can be facilitated via certain practice-based strategies via the service learning experience. It concludes by reflecting on the effectiveness of this project-based approach, and on the implications of enhancing this aspect of graduates' development *vis-à-vis* their future employability as rural geography professionals.

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Keywords: Geography, professional identity, rural, service learning.

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1. Introduction – Professional identity Development – Teaching and Learning Challenges.

A key role of universities is to prepare graduates for increasingly diverse professional roles in a rapidly-evolving world of work and, to foster graduates' awareness of their professional identity, or professional self. To make explicit for graduates the links between academic knowledge, skills and competences, and a future employment context is an ever-challenging task. Trede, Macklin and Bridges (2012) review the higher education literature for definitions of professional identity and how pedagogy has approached its development. They find professional identity loosely defined as "a way of being and a lens to evaluate, learn and make sense of practice" (ibid. p. 374). This emphasis on practice to promote professional identity development has been met with a range of teaching and learning strategies across disciplines (Reid, Dahlgren, Petocz and Abrandt, 2008). Theoretically, they are informed by approaches such as Wenger's (1998) communities of practice and situated learning, Schön's (1996) reflective practice, and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning. They include using practice-based approaches along with forms of professional participation and socialisation that promote a sense of being a professional and being part of a professional community (Billet, 2001;Reid et al. 2008; Reid and Solomonides, 2007). In the case of more clearly-established professions, Ghassan and Bohemia (2011) also reflect on how professional identities are discursively constructed within the prevailing "cultural context" (p.4) of the profession in question. This relational context is shaped via circumstances and trends such as the status of the labour market, or the profession's concerns and priorities. Here, identities are constructed using the range of "signs" (p.4) that emerge to set standards and other parameters and distinguish one profession from another. Examples of signs include professional accreditation and affiliation, awards, portfolios, the work of key influencers in that field, or other practices and traditions (ibid.). Professional identity development is also regarded as something dynamic, evolving and sustainable within the contexts in which individuals operate and in which they must continue to find their 'place' (Coldron and Smith, 1999; Hunter, Laursen and Seymour, 2006).

Geography, along with other disciplines in the arts and humanities, is not subject to the kind of professional accreditation guidelines applied to medicine or legal studies for example. These

latter disciplines offer clearly-defined entry routes and popular recognition in both labour market terms and in terms of an established professional status that students can recognise and begin to emulate from an early stage, even before college entry. Reid et al. (2008) describe these as "diffuse" as opposed to "clear" professional fields … one where students' view of their potential career is unclear but is also one where they know their professional competencies will be valued" (p. 736). Geography graduates are not as consciously engaged in the process of acquiring a professional identity in the sense of being able to access and position themselves within a specific social space developed over time through accreditation and the range of other practices and traditions that it comprises (Coldron and Smith, 1999). The less clearly-defined identity attaching to geography renders it therefore more challenging for students to articulate, through CVs or in job interviews, where exactly their knowledge and skills lie or how they connect to the needs of prospective employers. Available studies on what constitutes professional geography have been based upon various competency models constructed from the career paths of geography graduates, documenting the ways in which their skills and abilities have come to be valued in various employment contexts (Downs, 1994; Solem, Cheung and Schlemper, 2008). These indicate employers' regard for certain discipline-specific skills and more general skills such as teamwork, communication and time management. Consequent occupations range from project management, to publishing, to town planning, where associated skills include the ability to conduct spatial and specific place-based research, to think across global and local scales, to think temporally, to think critically and analytically, and to use a broad range of skills simultaneously (see Solem et al., 2008 for detailed lists of job titles, skills and competences). From the discipline's perspective, the challenge is to promote for graduates forms of social space or communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 2006) within which narratives of a professional geography identity can be generated and sustained.

The aim of this paper then is to explore the ways that a discipline like rural geography can support graduates in developing a professional geography identity through the use of practice-based approaches to teaching and learning via service learning. Using a case study example of a Master's module in rural geography, the paper examines service learning as a participatory and reflexive approach to teaching and learning, using methods that link the application of academic knowledge of rural geography and more applied skills to a practice-based setting. Under the service learning approach, rural geography knowledge and skills are applied as a form of evolving professional practice with the rural communities at which it is directed.

Here, the development of professional practice is understood as a relational process, i.e. one that involves the co-production of rural geography knowledge in terms of its appropriate forms of application in conjunction with rural communities and situated within their specific rural place-based development contexts. It is through this process of co-production of rural geographical knowledge and practice (as a form of knowing-in-practice) that professional rural geography identities are also negotiated and consolidated.

The next section initially contextualises this discussion by briefly outlining the context for rural geography university teaching and is then followed by an elaboration on service learning as experiential learning that can promote professional identity formation. This latter discussion includes a linked explanation of relational approaches to advancing rural geographical knowledge via practice, particularly the ways in which co-produced knowledge in a specific community context provides the opportunity to test learning and consolidate professional identities in terms of evaluating and making sense of practice. The methodological approach to this study is then outlined, followed by an analysis of the evidence. Finally, some key conclusions and recommendations for ongoing promotion of rural geography graduates' professional identity formation as a key dimension of graduate attribute development are outlined.

2. Rural Geography – Contemporary Pedagogic Directions.

The context for rural geography teaching at third level is its rapidly-evolving research domain and the continued national and international significance of the rural in economic, social, cultural and political terms. Rural geography is defined as "the study of people, places, and landscapes in rural areas, and of the social and economic processes that shape these geographies" (Woods, 2009a, p.429). The increasingly interdisciplinary format of rural geography involving sub-disciplines such as economic geography, social geography, urban studies and political geography (Woods, 2009b) reflects its dynamism and responsiveness to recognizing and exploring the diversity of processes of rural change. Major trends such as globalisation, climate change, urbanisation and migration constitute key areas of research for contemporary rural geography in terms of how they bring about the restructuring of rural places and communities

and challenge their capacities to adapt and develop in sustainable ways (Marsden, 2006). Professional involvement in rural development requires the capacity to work and collaborate across different scales of activity from within increasingly context-specific local environments.

In devising rural teaching programmes, increasing attention is paid to the likely career paths of graduates and the ways in which a rural geography education equips them in this regard. These paths could include working in development roles in rural locations, or in a range of other sectors that prioritise and promote the importance of the rural and rural-related issues. In securing other forms of employment in the rural, the expectation is that students are also equipped with specialised knowledge and awareness about rural challenges and opportunities, which in turn enhances their capacities to contribute in more voluntary ways to evolving rural development and sustainability needs. This means devising teaching approaches that reinforce the links between learning and the applicability of that knowledge in relevant employment or everyday lived rural contexts, i.e., those that are geared towards establishing students' self-awareness of the range of knowledge and skills they possess and the confidence to articulate and apply them.

3. Service Learning – Grounding Professional Identity Development.

Service learning is a pedagogical approach that emphasises experiential learning, and particularly critical reflection on those experiences. Furco (2001) defines it as "a teaching strategy that enhances students' learning of academic content by engaging them in authentic activities in which they apply the content of the course to address identified needs in the local and broader community" (p. 67). Authentic service to a community identifies service learning as a form of enquiry- or problem-based learning through practice. Knowledge is applied through pro-active and independent forms of thinking to help solve problems in specific contexts (Bringle and Hatcher, 2009; Furco, 2001). This engagement with the community in question also helps to build professional identities because it provides a space within which professional socialisation can take place (Burnett, Hamel and Long, 2004; Feen-Calligan, 2005; Reynolds, 2005). Service learning as experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1996) reinforces academic enhancement, personal growth and civic learning – dimensions that also collectively provide the basis for professional identity formation. In a service learning setting, students, under the

guidance of instructors, move through the experiential learning stages, identifying the problem or issue to be addressed, continuously questioning their interpretation of it and the social and cultural context in which it is set (Knight, 2002; Gherardi, 2001, 2009; Fenwick, 2012), progressively advancing to "intellectually 'higher ground'" (Cone and Harris, 2003, p.37) and to a sense of professional competence. Service learning requires a reflective perspective that builds professional competence and awareness of a professional self (Doane and Varcoe, 2008; Fenwick, 2012; Gherardi, 2001; 2009). It is also well-placed to help students gain experience of what Nicolini and Roe (2014) describe as the ever-evolving nature of professional knowledge; how it emerges relationally as a function of the work context and how a professional identity can become a process of "negotiated adaptation" (Ibarra, 1999, p.765) between the individual and the work environment (see also Scanlon, 2011).

4.   Research Design.

This research explores the question of how graduates' professional identities are developed, particularly graduates of more diffuse disciplines such as geography where the 'signs' of professionalisation are not always clearly discernible. It focused on a service learning project that involved 10 students enrolled on an MA programme during the 2014-15 academic year and two locally-based development groups from a rural market town in the Irish midlands. To protect the identity of participants, the names of students, individuals, groups and the study location have been anonymised. Students, identified as S1 – S10, were themselves from rural areas, and would have experienced a rural way of life in economic, social and cultural terms. The first group, Rural Voice (RV), is a national rural advocacy group established in the 1990s which has its offices in Midtown. The second, Midtown Development Group (MDG), is a voluntary community development group established in early 2014 to promote economic development in Midtown and its hinterland. Rural Voice was approached as a result of previous research contacts with it, and MDG was identified as being involved in more specific place-based rural issues in Midtown. Both groups were identified first, through their broad local community representation and active involvement in, and high level of awareness of, contemporary rural development issues; and second, because their respective organisational structures (e.g. established offices, accessible full-time staff) met a range of practical and logistical requirements for students to engage with their staff during regular working hours.

This research draws on elements of action research, broadly defined as "any ongoing,

systematic, empirically based attempt to improve practice" (Tripp, 2005, p443), as a means to focus on the specific issue of professional identity development as a component of the service learning programme. It reflects a problem-solving strategy that involves devising solutions through research and producing guidelines for best practice (Denscombe, 2014; Harkavy, Puckett and Romer, 2000; Noffke and Somekh, 2008; Tripp, 2005). Tripp (2005) describes the associated process of inquiry as "a cycle in which one improves practice by systematically oscillating between taking action in the field of practice, and inquiring into it" (p.434), learning about both in the process. Tripp (2005) outlines the research sequences, from planning for the change to practice (practice) and evaluation of the results of same (inquiry), to its implementation (practice) and analysis of implementation (inquiry), through to evaluation of the change to practice and of the action enquiry process (inquiry) (p.434). In an educational context, Kemmis (2009) recommended that academic staff should regard themselves as more than just supervisors of traditional research, and become part of the working group, with the acknowledgement that students are primarily responsible for the final report or outputs. Throughout the entire process of this research, one or more members of academic staff involved in the service learning module were present.

The academic staff involved started by gathering evidence via their own discussions on the module structure, and from interviews with two key members of RV on what the latter considered to be the contemporary priorities for rural development and research at the level of local communities. This phase was conducted in July, ahead of the programme's commencement in September. This information was matched with the module's aims and learning outcomes to establish coherence between them. On commencement of the module, the research and its purpose were outlined to students over the course of one class. They were asked if they would be willing to participate in it through recounting their experiences of the service learning process, thereby enriching the evaluation accounts of what worked and why. Having been assured that participation was entirely voluntary and that it had no bearing on the module assessment, all students opted to be involved.

Staff held a first brainstorming session with students in order to profile Midtown as a rural town with a range of development challenges. This was followed by two meetings with RV staff members at its offices in Midtown, and two meetings with members of MDG in order to gather further information on Midtown's development situation and to discuss the possible format of the service learning project. These meetings were recorded and transcribed. Semi-structured interviews (also recorded and transcribed) were conducted with the students at the start of the

module and at the end. These explored the 'before and after' perspectives on the issue of a sense of professional knowing and identity, as well as raising the students' awareness of the intended trajectory towards professionalisation. This range of discourses among students, staff and Non-governmental organisation (NGO) representatives were analysed using thematic analysis to determine how understandings of professional knowing and practice, leading to professional identity, were being constructed, and whether broad patterns of meaning could be identified (Boyatsis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2012). Drawing on how thematic analysis was applied by Maguire and Delahunt (2017) in their study of how students make sense of and use feedback, this research uses a top-down, theoretical thematic analysis driven by the research question. Following the structure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) (also applied by Maguire and Delahunt, 2017) the interview transcripts were read to generate familiarity with the data and then read again to generate initial codes using open coding. A cyclical process of coding, along with identifying, reviewing and defining themes followed (Saldana, 2009). Three key themes were ultimately chosen: Processes of professional socialisation; developing academic and more applied skills; and, academic interventions in the service-learning process. The codes and themes were organized and collated using Excel.

5. Professional Socialisation through Service Learning.

Professional socialisation emerged as a key theme throughout the service learning process. Professional socialisation is that aspect of professional identity formation where professionals learn "the values, behaviours and attitudes necessary to assume their professional role" (Howkins and Evens, 1999, p.41). It is about making sense of and responding to the signs emanating from that professional context or community of practice (Ghassan and Bohemia, 2011) occurring in what Richardson (1999) describes as a "network of situational social exchange" (p.463). Socialisation takes place within the classroom via the more formal education and training programme, and in the field, ideally in practice-based settings as an ongoing process of development within communities of practice (Ajjawi and Higgs, 2008).

The students' earliest exposure to the practice-based setting, and to an associated community of interest, was during preparation for the initial meetings with RV and MDG representatives to discuss the possible project format. As with the opening and closing interviews with students

on their perceptions of a professional self, the purpose of these meetings was also to stimulate professional self-awareness and construct an initial narrative of professional competence. This stage of the service learning process involved the students outlining what they believed they could contribute to the community via the two organisations, which meant articulating the value of their academic knowledge of rural development concepts and issues, and their methodological skills and analytical skills. As a starting point, and to indicate some level of advance preparedness, the students had used desk-based research on Midtown to identify and propose three potential development themes – rural tourism, social inclusion and rural adult education.

RV with its strong advocacy remit, flagged the need to deliver, in a socially responsible way, on common good dimensions of rural development when transitioning from desk-based ideas to their place-based application. From a practice standpoint, they pointed out that this meant dealing with the frequent challenge of inadequate or missing local background data on which to plan coherent strategies. Here, they urged the students to recognise their own specific research skills and capacities to enhance the local rural development process through providing informed, evidence-based decision-making, that is, highlighting the opportunities for students to professionally shape and improve rural development practice. Similarly, from a common good perspective, they also questioned the students on how they would gain insights into the level of local community buy-in for any development proposal, citing the need to secure quality of life for rural dwellers as a priority aim. The example they offered was the students' proposed rural tourism development theme, and how it would achieve a balance between the needs of tourists and the local population. In this regard they pointed to the potentially contested local rural development domain involving an extending network of individuals and agencies, where norms and values on what constituted appropriate and relevant rural development were set as much at local community as at organisational or academic levels. This indication of a power balance that needed to be negotiated between rural development professionals and community, illustrated to students that a crucial aspect of practice was dealing with uncertainty and adapting to the dynamic of specific contexts (Schön, 1996).

Meetings with the MDG similarly drew students' attention to the complexity of the actual practice-based context of development. The MDG representatives pointed to the fragmented nature of

the local development NGO landscape, the fact that many of the groups were too small to effect significant change, and the lack of representation of younger members of the community. During the post-meeting reflective sessions, the students recounted the impacts of these initial interactions and accounts of local rural development on their earlier assumptions about practising rural development. They specifically discussed the kind of knowledge and understanding required to be fully prepared for the field, which was most likely to be obtained when actually working within the community: "I am not as sure about my expertise; I think it is a sort of working knowledge; knowledge is based on experience as well, and I lack experience of the real world" (S2); "I think we have skills in terms of gathering information but we also need knowledge of factors like socio-economic issues in specific communities" (S7); "We need more case studies of what does work" (S3). The discussions with RV and MGD about how to set development priorities generated debate on socially responsible development and how this might differ from purely economic development in its sustainability aims. Referring, for example, to MDG's accounts of how the Irish economic boom of the early-mid 2000s had unexpectedly caused the closure of some local businesses, one student commented: "Usually development is seen as something positive, but when might it not be? What if communities don't want certain kinds of development? It is definitely not a case of one-size-fits all" (S9). This, and the issue of a fragmented local development community also drew students' attention to the likelihood of locally-held reservations about the development intentions of the different groups; reservations that would have to be taken into account, and how to manage them: "It seems that the [economic] boom hindered trust among stakeholders – how do we build that up again?" (S1). Rural development was being understood by them as bound up in the local micropolitics of change management which would form the background for most development practice that they would undertake as professionals. This increased sensitivity to the place-based specificities of rural development indicated students' progression through a reflective process, revising their earlier ideas about how they would operate or behave as professionals; the need to prioritise a co-operative approach with the local community whilst still aiming for development progress; the recognition that local development knowledge is ultimately co-produced but that much of community knowledge is tacit in nature and requires skilled professional development practices to elicit it: "Good local relationships are obviously very important; local people like to minimise change where possible and would prefer to manage it themselves rather than see outsiders coming in to do it" (S4). "Rural areas do have strengths, but they need to be harnessed" (S7).

One of the activities undertaken by students to gather evidence was to devise a survey in collaboration with MDG and administer it in Midtown face-to-face to 100 random members of the community. This work was carried out over the course of one day, with students working in pairs. They reported a strong sense of a professional self during this engagement with the public. This came about in several ways; one was through having to explain repeatedly to respondents who they were and what the research was about:

"You have people asking you where you are studying and what you are studying, and you find you are very well able to tell them; it becomes easier; you are not talking about it in academic language, you are just saying it in plain English, and I think the more you say it and the more you explain it, the more it becomes clear in your head". (S7)

The survey could be regarded as an "enactment of knowledge" (Zukas and Kilminster, 2014, p.45), part of a wider process of what they term "learning responsibility" (ibid.). It constituted a pedagogic tool in the construction of a framework for conducting fieldwork – one which also allowed the students to both apply and display knowledge of the regularised nature of methodological skills. Another sense of an emerging professional self came about through the actual act of administering the survey as a kind of performance of a professional self:

"On the times that we went around the area [on the survey] and speaking to people; you had your clipboard and you felt that you had a purpose, you felt almost confident that…you know…I didn't feel I was a student; we viewed ourselves as researchers – we would all say that" (S5)

Physically conducting the survey in the town – being visible – represented a "symbolic material presence" (Fenwick, 2012, p.10), helping students to construct the perception of themselves as professional researchers out and about gathering their data. The survey was also an integral part of developing professional practice and establishing a professional identity for students - i.e. a way of demonstrating the value of professional knowledge and its contribution to local development. At the end of the project work, the students presented their main findings at the annual RV conference which was held in Midtown. Knowing how to compose and give

presentations from their training in the classroom setting enabled them to impart to a wider community audience the knowledge that had been established and to obtain on the spot feedback. This further refined their levels of local awareness and understanding of the development context.

6. Working with Explicit and Implicit Knowledge in the Practice-based Context – the Impact on Professional Identity Awareness.

Students' emerging awareness of a professional identity was most strongly influenced by experiencing how their knowledge, their ideas on what development might work and why, and their approach to fieldwork, was endorsed by the groups. The transition from a student operating in a simulated and protected class environment to an individual responsible for the impacts of his or her knowledge and advice in a practice-based setting was described as initially challenging:

> *"At first we didn't think we were going to help at all. Then when we were devising the survey in the classroom and discussing what we might need to investigate, we realised we did have knowledge of things like networking and integrated rural tourism; the MDG is a very knowledgeable group, but I do think we were helpful – we just didn't realise that we were going to be, or what we were going to do"* (S9)

> *"It was a boost of confidence; you do feel like you are important; they are looking at you – that you have an opinion and you can help them"* (S3)

> *"After a bit, after people started relaxing, working together, they actually wanted to hear what we had done; they wanted our information, our survey results; they wanted to hear what our ideas were"* (S5)

Reflecting Feen-Calligan's (2005) ideas of how a sense of professionalism is generated, there

were also comments on how students reinforced one another's expertise through their own discussions about interactions with the groups and the progress of the project: "At first, we were not confident about our knowledge; but then as we got into it I think we were reassuring each other, that we had a lot more than we thought" (S2). Making comparisons between their academic knowledge and the professional backgrounds of the MDG members helped them to assess their knowledge of rural issues against those of people who typically become involved in development in a voluntary capacity; one of the MDG members was a retired planner, one a secondary school teacher, another was a local business owner. In other words, these were individuals with strong social and cultural capital to advance local development with an informed perspective on development challenges at the local level. The students still discovered however, their own specific contribution to knowledge. An example of this emerged in relation to the proposed rural adult education project, where the students' background research on the town's adult education college revealed its important links to a regional institute of technology as a feeder for certain programmes. This new knowledge led to a discussion on how to further develop this network:

> *"They [group members] didn't know the importance of education as a resource that they could build on; we had ideas and they gave us their ideas and it worked well; it definitely gave me a sense of confidence I wouldn't have had before – we did the background research when they had not thought of it; it gave me a sense of pride"* (S1)

While the value of implicit or tacit knowledge held by the groups was acknowledged repeatedly, by applying a critical perspective drawn from rural governance the students also identified how local group fragmentation could be resulting in duplication of efforts where local knowledge resources were not being pooled, especially in relation to funding applications. The decision by the MDG to set itself up as a representative umbrella group for a number of these smaller groups reflected acknowledgement of this insight:

> *"They [MDG] thought more was better instead of less [groups]; there were a lot of groups but it needed just one of them to work together with the others; there was no networking up to then – no sense of community. We had learned about this best practice and*

explained it to them" (S4)

Other discussions about existing local projects included the ways in which value-added could be realised through developing strategic connections between them. Projects that had already been undertaken in Midtown (in which MDG members had been involved) whilst very successful at an individual level were commented upon by the students as missing out on potential synergies, especially if they were tourism or amenity-related. These observations reflected in-class discussions about best-practice approaches to local rural development strategies and the application of this critique to the Midtown approach which they regarded as more ad-hoc in nature. Students were also asked to evaluate the MDG's approach to development as a way to assess the former's capacity to make a judgement through application of rural development knowledge and experience gained through the field-based practice. This reflected their capacity to interpret the local context and the micro politics of decision-making as an inherent part of local development practice. The resultant insights were that the MDG was highly knowledgeable about the local development context and local funding opportunities, and with their plans being ambitious in scope they were too reliant on a small group of people that limited involvement of the wider community. This illustrated a growing degree of confidence in identifying and interpreting the challenges of delivering and sustaining local rural development: "They are focused on what they already have, on endogenous development – they have grasped that – which is important" (S7). Another described it in terms of the depth of critique she could bring to issues that she felt were certainly known to local development groups, but not in her opinion at the same level of awareness:

> *"We know now that there is so much more; that if there is a problem, it is connected to another problem – it is a deeper set of issues; before I would have thought, 'oh broadband - that means I can't have faster internet - but now I realise that there are so many more implications for entrepreneurs, for development – what an area needs if it is going to be able to develop, but also what is driving the underlying policy priorities related to that"* (S5)

7. Conclusions.

Service learning provides considerable scope to develop students' sense of professional identity

and a space for professional socialisation for more diffuse disciplines such as geography and sub-disciplines like rural geography where the range of signs of professionalisation are not always clearly discernible. The evidence from this research indicates that academics have a key role to play in establishing and promoting signs relevant to rural geography, and in helping to construct a narrative of professionalisation in rural geography that guides students towards developing a professional self with consequent links to a range of employability attributes. To do this, academic staff can use their specific knowledge of the prevailing cultural context for rural geography that is shaped largely by research and policy priorities, particularly in the absence of recognised formal professional accreditation. In other words, academic staff yield considerable influence in shaping students' perceptions of their professional identity for the duration of teaching and also for the longer term (Lamote and Engels, 2010). This was evident during the meetings with RV and MDG, where a form of community of interest emerged and where a process of identifying the main place-specific rural development issues, and validating forms of rural knowledge to solve problems occurred in a co-produced and negotiated way. Here, academic staff intervened at key moments in the discussion to draw attention to rural knowledge held by students that had been covered in earlier modules, reinforcing awareness of their specific learning and competence and of the kinds of practice contexts in which it was applicable. During the class reflective sessions staff continued to mediate discussions and indicate to students how and where their academic and problem-solving skills were fulfilling the project's aims and objectives in the course of the practice-based activities.

The class-based reflective sessions as part of the experiential learning cycle of service learning did bring about students' evolving critical understandings of complex, context-specific situations and circumstances as seen in their capacity to successfully apply rural geography concepts and theories to the Midtown development context; in other words, it reflected the development of higher order learning skills and capacities to revise initial potentially narrowly-based assumptions and perceptions of an issue as an important dimension of experiential learning (Bringle and Hatcher, 2009; Cone and Harris, 2003). Ultimately, how well students employ their "permission to think" (Brown et al. 2003, p.110), and the level of understanding they exhibit of acquiring "learning responsibility" (Zukas and Kilminster, 2014, p.45) is seen as relevant to how they will succeed in the labour market where their ability to identify and articulate these attributes in themselves will be used as a measure of their professional competence in the knowledge economy. In this regard, some students also showed signs of struggling to synthesise

conceptual information outside of the project remit. This possibly reflects the fact that the project provided more tangible and self- evident ways to apply knowledge compared to its more abstract application to an imagined situation that might be raised in a job interview, for example. Undoubtedly, it also related to the length of time that was available to students over the course of the service learning module (approximately 12 weeks' duration) to become fully grounded in the context and to comprehensively test their knowledge and skills, which raises the question of what constitutes a minimum desired length of time in which to be adequately immersed in a service learning practice-based setting. This also flags other questions (including resource-related) about where graduate professional identity development sits in the relationship between university-level programme design in rural geography and the relevant graduate labour market. This is particularly important given the essential function that it (professional identity) performs in establishing graduates' own employability expectations and aspirations within that labour market. When account is also taken of the value placed by the community on the students' contribution to their local development needs and the fact that this contribution did effect positive change, extending programme scope to more widely incorporate reflective and practice-based pedagogies would seem to represent the best option to achieving those aims.

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