First year students negotiating professional and academic identities: The case of scholarly soldiers

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Abstract

As they make the transition to tertiary study, first year students adopt complex new identities. In professional courses, this entails both academic and professional identities. This paper reports on a study of the first year experience at UNSW Canberra (the Australian Defence Force Academy). UNSW Canberra aims to provide a quality liberal education for future military officers. With on-going military training and supervision, students develop a strong sense of professional identity as members of the Defence Forces. But what of their identity as scholars? This paper discusses the question of academic identity in an institution with a specific professional goal and reflects on the implications for learning advisers and lecturers in professional courses at other universities. Using a framework of social identity complexity, our findings suggest that students who manage these dual identities effectively are more likely to succeed than those who are unable to reconcile their professional and academic selves.

Student identity and why it matters

Identity has long been recognised as a central factor in student learning, closely related to key determinants of student learning such as engagement, motivation and self-efficacy. Students' understandings of "Who am I as a learner?" are intimately interrelated with the extent to which they choose to "invest cognitively, emotionally and actively" (Zepke, 2013, p. 5) in their study. However, learner identities also jostle up against other aspects of students' identities—how they see themselves in terms of gender, religion, class, and as future professionals. Negotiating these multiple identities is complex, and especially so for students coming to study straight from school, who may have little experience beyond the zone of school and family (Orbe, 2004). While identity formation is always dynamic and fragile, for first year students entering the world of tertiary learning, there are particular challenges. As they experience new lives, interact with new people, and meet new disciplines and new ways of constructing knowledge, they are simultaneously working out how they position themselves in terms of this new academic community. Thus, first year students may experience "crises of confidence, conflicts of identity, feelings of strangeness" (Ivanic, 1997, p. 7).

For students in professionally-oriented courses, the situation is more complex still. Not only are they entering the new world of academia, they are also setting out on new career paths as future teachers, health workers or journalists, for example. This paper reports on a study of first year university students in Australia's military academy, UNSW Canberra (the Australian Defence Force Academy). It explores the ways in which first year students manage social identity complexity. The paper uses a model of social identity complexity proposed by Roccas and Brewer (2002) and argues that students who are unable to reconcile their dual identities as both professionals and students may experience difficulty in coping with first year.

Identity formation is profoundly social, formed both from within and without. Students see the world through their own eyes and position themselves accordingly, but they are also acutely aware of the world looking on at them. As Ivanic (1997) argues, identity is not determined but constructed – individuals adopt identities in social contexts in terms of the identity possibilities available to them. Family, teachers, colleagues, supervisors and peers all provide potential role models and possible identities in different spheres.

Identity formation is also interconnected with the experience of learning. As students learn new knowledge and practices, they become new people. Dean and Jolly (2012) suggest that learning is at root "a process of recognising and adapting one's different identities" (p. 228). As Wortham (2004) puts it, learning is not just epistemological in the sense of gaining new knowledge, but also ontological in the sense of taking on new ways of being (p.716). Transformation, a goal espoused more recently by constructivist educators, has long been the aim of education in western universities. Academics in the liberal, western tradition have aimed to shape their students into individuals who are open-minded, broadly educated, responsible citizens, familiar with the canon of knowledge in their discipline and able to form well-reasoned and principled opinions.

However, this liberal view of education is somewhat at odds with the growing focus in our universities on professional education.

For many first year students, new academic identities are also interrelated with their aspirations for future careers. Students appear to be increasingly instrumental in their approach to tertiary education. In a national survey of the first year experience in higher education in Australia, conducted by James, Krause and Jennings (2010), 96% of students said that studying in a field that really interests them was important in making their choice to study. Furthermore, 86% of respondents also said that improving their job prospects was an important reason for undertaking tertiary study and 75% said that it was important to get training for a specific job. This was a small but significant increase on previous years. Thunborg, Bron and Eström (2012) found that this pragmatic approach to study is particularly evident for "non-traditional" students, who are the first in their family to study at university. Previous research suggests that non-traditional students also are less motivated and less likely to have a sense of belonging: they may feel "disengaged or alienated" (Zepke & Leach, 2010, p. 172).

The tension between the professional and the purely academic is increasingly apparent on many university campuses. The tradition of knowledge-seeking and pure research in universities exists in counterpoint to professionally-oriented courses which aim to prepare students to participate in a specific career by developing professional knowledge, skills and attributes. Some researchers have theorised that academic performance will be improved if students have a strong sense of connection to their future profession, and that this can be enhanced by fostering the students' sense of professional identity. In the specific context of social work education for example, Kaighin and Croft (2013) note that students' sense of connection is key to engagement and academic success. These researchers aimed to develop students' sense of identity as social workers, as well as students, by inviting guest speakers from the profession and arranging internships (p.118). Martin, Spolander, Ali and Maas (2014) argue that students who do not develop a strong sense of identity in their discipline lack the perseverance to do well in their studies and to develop deep learning practices. Similarly, Dean and Jolly (2012) explain how some "anti-learning behaviours" (p. 228) can arise from students' social identity construction. Indeed, the link between identity and learning outcomes has been demonstrated empirically by Yopyk and Prentice (2005) who found that student athletes who were primed with their student identity before completing a Maths test performed much better than when primed with the athlete identity.

Social identity complexity theory

One theoretical framework which can be used to tease out the formation of multiple and possibly conflicting identities of first year students has been proposed by Roccas and Brewer (2002). Their model of social identity complexity can help to account for the ways in which individuals incorporate memberships of multiple in-groups in their overall social identity (see Figure 1).

a. Compartmentalisation

Some individuals compartmentalise their social identities, treating each quite separately and isolating the identity to separate occasions and locations. Thus, a Greek Australian might feel predominantly Greek with her Greek relatives, while behaving and speaking quite differently with her Australian work colleagues.

b. Intersection

Others define themselves more narrowly. Someone who identifies very specifically as a Greek-Australian would see both Greeks and Australians as members of outgroups, while his/her ingroup might be very specifically other Greek-Australians.

c. Dominance

Some individuals see themselves as belonging predominantly to one particular social group, while their membership of other social groups is less significant. Migrants, for example, may espouse membership of the host group very vigorously, while rejecting their home culture, or vice versa.

d. Merger

The most balanced and, Roccas and Brewer argue, also the most inclusive, is the merger identity. This is characteristic of individuals who encompass multiple identities seamlessly, so that both identity groups are important in both situations: for example, the Greek-Australian who identifies confidently as such and sees both groups as their in-group no matter what the situation.

This paper uses Roccas and Brewer's model to analyse the emerging identities of first year students at UNSW Canberra, the Australian Defence Force Academy, a context in which military and academic identities interact in complex ways. We argue that this framework offers insights into the ways in which first year students, especially in professionally-oriented courses, negotiate identity as they cross the boundaries into new social and academic contexts.

Australia's military academy: A unique study environment

UNSW Canberra prepares students for a particular career (in this case, the profession of arms). Its charter is to provide a balanced and liberal undergraduate education that will give graduates the knowledge, skills and aptitudes they need in their military profession
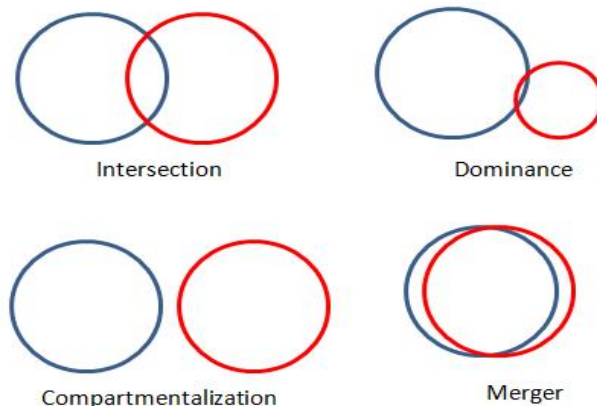

Figure 1: **Social identity complexity (adapted from Roccas & Brewer 2002, p. 90)**

(http://info.unsw.adfa.edu.au/). This education occurs within a military environment.

In some ways, first year students' experience of transition to study at UNSW Canberra is similar to students elsewhere. Like all first year students, they are adapting to a new learning environment, with new modes of study, new resources, and new cultures of learning. Like other first year students, many of whom have been highly successful in their previous study, they may find that they are not achieving the high grades that they are accustomed to. Like other students, new technology is making an impact on the ways in which they learn. As at other universities, a growing proportion of students are "non-traditional". For example, at UNSW Canberra, 46% of students are the first in their family to undertake a university degree.

In other ways, however, UNSW Canberra, as the only university within a military environment, offers a different learning environment to the majority of universities in Australia. Undergraduate students undertake a university degree while simultaneously preparing to be officers in the armed services. First year students participate in intensive military preparation in the five weeks before their course commences, and then continue their military training in the following semesters. The student cohort is unusual in its homogeneity: although students are drawn from all over Australia, there are very few international students or mature-age students in comparison with other universities. Furthermore, UNSW Canberra is predominantly male (>80% in first year). Unlike most students, undergraduates at UNSW Canberra are also paid a salary while they study. Nearly all students live on the campus and receive their meals there.

Students at UNSW Canberra are more likely to have moved from a different state or territory, and thus have left behind their close friends and family. However, UNSW Canberra is also different in that it offers considerable support, in the sense that the Divisional Officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) take a close interest in the cadets' performance. It also has the highest staff-student ratio in the country (9:1). Nevertheless, there is considerable pressure on students to succeed: those who fail a course may have their leave cancelled, and will have to overload in subsequent semesters. They may even lose their commission. Most significantly, students at UNSW Canberra are also trainee officers. By enlisting in the armed services, they are committing to a life under the authority of the military, and to a long tradition of military culture in which obedience and loyalty is demanded.

UNSW Canberra, however, is a civilian institution, although located on military premises. Thus students move between two spheres on a daily basis: their classes take place in the civilian "academic side", while they live on the "military side" under military authority. They are simultaneously studying and undergoing military training. They wear uniform to class, but carry laptops, text-books and folders like any other student.

So the question arises: For first year students, to what extent does their military identity conflict with, or challenge, their identity as students in the civilian academy? Our research asked the following questions:

1. Do UNSW Canberra students identify primarily as students (scholars) or as members of the Defence Force (soldiers)?

2. How does their sense of identity compare with other students around Australia?

3. Is there any conflict between their identity as scholars or soldiers?

4. What lessons can be learned from this exploration of identity of students in a military academy that can be extrapolated to other contexts in which students are developing both professional and academic identities?

The mixed method design

The survey used for this study was based on the national survey of first year experience reported by James et al. (2010). The research was conducted according to the requirements of ethics approval from UNSW. The survey was distributed online, using Qualtrics software, to all 320 first year students in week three of the second semester, 2013. Ninety responses were returned, a response rate of 26% which is similar to that of the James et al. study response rate of 24%. Questions included themes of their university experience, their sense of belonging, motivation and time pressure (see James et al. for details). The survey was followed by semi-structured interviews with eight student volunteers, who self-selected on completion of the survey. Interview questions were based on the areas identified in the survey where UNSW Canberra student responses differed from those in James et al. These volunteers included two women, two students who spoke a language other than English at home, two mature age students, students from all four broad discipline areas in the university and students from all three services. Each interview lasted about 35 minutes. The interviews were recorded, de-identified and transcribed. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper. While the authors were all academics at UNSW Canberra, the interviews were conducted with students who had no direct relationship with the authors.

Analysis of survey data: A sense of belonging … but low motivation

Analysis of the survey data revealed some interesting differences between the UNSW Canberra data and the national survey by James et al. (2010), In particular, the UNSW Canberra students reported a greater sense of belonging to the university community; they worked together with other students much more frequently; and yet they struggled much more with motivation. These findings appeared to be somewhat contradictory as motivation is often positively linked with a sense of belonging in the literature on tertiary learning (Cohen & Garcia, 2008; Meeuwisse, Severiens, & Born, 2010; Walton & Cohen, 2007).

In comparison with the students surveyed by James et al. (2010), the UNSW Canberra students had a much higher sense of belonging to the University: 66% agreed or strongly agreed to a sense of belonging in comparison to only 50% of the students nationally. This is perhaps not unsurprising, as the UNSW Canberra students nearly all live on campus, they are sharing experiences of transition to both university and military life, and have undergone a period of intensive military training together. While the UNSW Canberra students had a strong sense of belonging to the university, their sense of belonging to the Defence Forces (at least for some) was even greater: 24% of students strongly agreed to a sense of belonging to Defence, while only 12% of students strongly agreed to a sense of belonging to the university.

The survey also revealed a strong culture of collaboration among the Defence Force students. In comparison to the responses in the national survey, students at UNSW Canberra were much more likely to work with others on areas of difficulty: 66 per cent of UNSW students said that they frequently worked with other students, in comparison to only 17 per cent of the students surveyed by James et al (2010). Earlier research has indicated that collaborating students not only perform better, but have deeper approaches to learning (Tang, 1993).

Despite this strong sense of belonging and culture of close collaboration, the survey indicated that the UNSW Canberra students were less committed to continuing in their studies than their counterparts in other universities. Twenty-seven per cent of students had considered discontinuing, as compared with 23 per cent in the James et al. (2010) study. Most students in the survey who had considered discontinuing cited issues related with identity. For example, one student put it succinctly: *Confusion as to whether I wanted to enter directly in the forces or do the degree.* Some wanted to concentrate on their military role (e.g. *Considered becoming a commando*); others they felt that their military role interfered too much with their academic studies:

> I felt I was studying the degree for the wrong reasons, not what I planned to do when I was in year 12 but instead I was accepting a lower emphasis on academics and passionate subjects just because of ADFA and the military. (Survey, open-ended response)

In comparison with the national survey, students were less likely to be enjoying their course, to be satisfied with their university experience or to like being a university student. In particular, a much higher proportion (49%) said that they had difficulty getting motivated, in comparison with 36% of the students in the James et al. (2010) study.

The findings of the UNSW Canberra study appeared to provide somewhat contradictory evidence. On the one hand, students had a strong sense of belonging and a strongly collaborative culture suggesting that they identified strongly both as students and as members of the Defence Forces. Such a sense of belonging should have meant that students were also engaged and motivated to perform well in their studies. However, this did not seem to be the case: both the surveys and the interviews pointed to a prevailing "Ps get degrees" attitude among first year students (whereby students aim only for a bare pass). These findings concur with an earlier study of first year at UNSW Canberra (Connor & McDermott, 2013) which identified a "grey man" syndrome: students generally did not want to be noticed either for doing well, or for doing poorly.

Analysis of the interview data

Analysis of the interview data, using the social identity complexity model proposed by Roccas and Brewer (2002), shown in Figure 1, sheds some light on the apparent contradiction in the survey data between students' high sense of belonging but relatively low motivation, by exploring how different students managed their dual identities as both scholars and soldiers.

Compartmentalisation

The interview data showed that some students dealt with their complex lives by keeping their military selves and their academic selves quite separate. This seemed to be easier for the few mature

students in the study, particularly those who lived off campus. As Bruce put it:

Essentially I just keep the whole thing separate. I'm doing university and I'm in the military. [...]. When I'm at a lecture, I'm a student. When I move out of the lecture [...] I'm a soldier again and then when I'm doing academics, I'm a student. (Bruce)

Intersection

A few students seemed to have a very specific identity – neither fully committed to the military, nor to academic life, but living in a very specific zone at the intersection between the two. For example, Jake saw himself quite specifically as an Air Force engineer:

I want to be an engineer in the Air Force and I want to work with planes ... computing, programming, electronics, that's what I enjoy..... an electrical engineer in the Air Force [...] that's pretty much my identity. (Jake)

Merger

Some students, who radiated an enormous enthusiasm for both their study and the military, identified equally and seamlessly with both roles. For example:

So now I'm doing Arts and loving it [...] Naval training? It was fantastic –loved it. (Sally)

If I get to rate it, it's 5 out of 5, incorporating military and civilian university. It's very good. (David)

I enjoy my sport and doing a Bachelor of Business. You get to do everything I enjoy. It's very good. (George)

Dominance

In stark contrast with students who fitted the "merger" category, problems seemed to arise for the students who positioned themselves predominantly either as military or as academic. In other words, these students had difficulty managing their dual identity.

On the one hand, one of the interviewees was more interested in being a good student than in succeeding in the military. As she said:

My passion definitely lies in academics more than military and I've found that's a minority here. (Abby)

After two semesters of struggling to cope with balancing military and academic life, extra early morning duties and doing without adequate sleep, she had finally given up and decided to leave at the end of the year:

People like me [...] they end up wanting to leave because they do like academics but this environment doesn't promote good academics[...].It's just the culture of this place. It's great, but at the same time absolutely horrendous. (Abby)

The tension between the military and the academic was talked of by some students who perceived that, although the institution as a whole was supposed to prioritise academic over military activities, this was often not the case.

That's the big rivalry between the university side and the military side ... some of the staff not understanding ... saying it's [the academic] our priority but they're not acting as though it is. (George)

"Academics comes first" is just a catch phrase, it is rarely put into practice, the military still has complete control over how you think, pressure they put on you to finish your military paperwork and tasks first. (Survey, open-ended response)

On the other hand, some students prioritised their military lives over their academic lives. For these students, studying at university was predominantly a pathway to their chosen career. And as they are guaranteed a job at the end, the grades did not seem to be relevant:

> *I think here, because you have a job guaranteed at the end, sometimes it's "P's-get-degrees", you know?* (Ray)

> *Everyone has a guaranteed career, as long as we can pass, and [...] they make it pretty hard to fail here. I've heard a lot of people say that there's not much incentive to do well.* (Brian)

Brian also explained how dull studying seemed in contrast to his military training:

> *You get really excited about your future career in the army and then you come back here and you're just another uni student going through the motions and stuff.* (Brian)

This feeling of demotivation was further compounded by the perception that a degree would not necessarily be valued when they graduate, as their commanding officers might well be younger than them and not have university qualifications. Surprisingly, some students thought that their knowledge would not be applicable, at least for some years, in their future jobs. As one Engineering student said:

> *Chances are, depending on my posting, for the first two or three years I won't have to do anything about Engineering..... I think ...expecting someone to - to get a high standard in academics is not really beneficial from our point of view because of what you're going to do afterwards. ... And you can see the number of hours they're spending trying to nut something out that you end up forgetting in six or seven months time or not using it for the next years, it's a bit disheartening, you know.* (Ray)

Discussion

The study suggests that some students handle identity complexity more effectively than others. In particular, the students in the "merger" group, who were equally at ease in both their academic and their military identities radiated a sense of well-being, and were coping well with their study. The students in the "compartmentalisation" group and the "intersection" group had also developed effective coping strategies. However, the students in the "dominant" group were less able to cope. Those like Abby, who favour the academic side, report feeling frustrated by the military demands on their time. However, those who favour the military side seem to take a performative approach to study, doing the minimum to scrape through their courses. It should be stressed that this study included first year students only, and it is possible that as students progress to later years they become more engaged. Further research is needed here.

Although this study was conducted in a military academy, the findings may be applicable more widely to other professionally-oriented courses. The study raises the question of how universities can most effectively help students to develop strong dual identities both as students and as future professionals. For Martin et al. (2014), the key is to develop a deep approach to learning by valuing reflection and critical debate within the course. Students in our study also spoke of the benefits of bringing in practitioners to explain the relevance of university study to their future careers. O'Donovan, Price and Rust (2004) propose that this is a teaching strategy which could be usefully integrated into every aspect of tertiary learning, particularly into assessment practices.

Student identity is a key factor in tertiary learning. First year students are at a time of transition in their lives, negotiating a raft of new possible identities. Those who are able to build a strong student identity and merge it successfully with their imagined future identities as professionals in their chosen field will be able to thrive academically and professionally. This study indicates that Roccas and Brewer's (2002) model of social identity complexity provides a useful perspective which can stimulate lecturers to consider more deeply how they can support their students in developing strong, merged identities. The effective merging of identities can enhance their experience of first year in professional education courses and will stand them in good stead throughout their university careers and beyond.

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