Contextualised Meaning Making: one way of rethinking experiential learning and self-directed learning?

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ABSTRACT Experiential learning and self-directed learning are keystone constructs in adult education. This paper examines ideas underpinning these constructs and offers a rethinking of experiential learning and self-directed learning as contextualised meaning making. In exploring this concept, the paper discusses contextualised meaning making as a multi-layered experience incorporating exposed meanings, hidden meanings and unheard voices. These ideas are illustrated by reference to practice in an adult education degree program.

Introduction

Adult Education is a mosaic of many ideas. Self-directed learning, experiential learning, vocational learning, transformative learning, critical, feminist, and post-modern pedagogies are just some of these. Some, vocational learning for example, tend to reinforce the status quo, while others, like critical pedagogy, result in social or individual change. Experiential and self-directed learning may, but do not necessarily, lead to change, so can be maintaining or transformational. This flexibility enables experiential learning and self-directed learning to assume keystone positions in the adult education mosaic.

According to Usher et al. (1997, p. 100) “In all the traditions of adult learning, experience has been accorded a privileged place as the source of learning in a learner-centred pedagogy and at the very centre of knowledge production and knowledge acquisition.” Similarly important to adult learning is self-directed learning. As long ago as 1973, Kidd (cited in Brookfield, 1988, p. 103) wrote: “… the prime purpose of adult education, or of any kind of education, is to make of the subject a continuing ‘inner-directed’ self-operating learner”. The focus of both is the self as the source of learning.

Both of these concepts have, however, been challenged. Recently, writers like Usher et al. (1997), Brookfield (1998) and Edwards and Usher (1998) have questioned the uncritical acceptance of experiential learning. Self-directed learning, too, has been challenged over a long period (Collins, 1991; Flannery, 1994; Keddie, 1980; McNair, 1996; Newman, 1993). We acknowledge the power of these critiques
but retain aspects of experiential and self-directed learning as seminal adult learning concepts in our teaching, using social as well as individualistic approaches.

In this paper we outline ideas underpinning experiential and self-directed learning; summarise key critiques; present our rethinking of them as contextualised meaning making; and show how we use this in our practice. We conclude by reflecting on further improvements to our teaching in Bachelor and Master of Education programs for adult educators.

Experiential Learning and Self-directed Learning: overview and critique

Overview

Experiential learning has become a dominant feature in the ever-emerging landscape of adult education. Writers from Dewey and Lindeman to Lewin, Piaget and Kolb place great store on learning as a “process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). In this process people reflect on, analyse and reconstruct their experiences to understand their world and what is happening to them. (Andresen et al., 1995). In short, learning is a process of making meaning from all experiences—cognitive, emotional, physical, social and spiritual. Learners draw from all their worlds—public, professional and private (Boud & Miller, 1996). Caffarella and Barnett (1994) enumerate five reasons why experiential learning is seminal to adult learning. First, rich life experiences and background provide necessary building blocks for learning. Adults can reflect on past experiences to make and re-make meanings. Second, even where the actual experience is the same, different individuals construct different meanings. This implies that knowledge is constructed, not fixed. Next, the learning process usually involves learners’ active engagement. It is not sufficient to transmit information from one person to another. Rather, people construct meaning for themselves. Many learners also want to be connected to others’ learning. Group interaction is important. Finally, adults’ unique life situations form contexts for their learning. These influence the meaning they will draw from experiences.

There is no universally accepted definition of self-directed learning (Candy, 1991). However, many identify an external dimension that focuses on individual learners grasping control of their learning process. This dimension, often privileged in understandings of self-directed learning, is based on the work of Rogers (1969), Knowles (1970, 1975) and Tough (1979). Knowles assumed that adults are self-directed learners. He identified general principles to give learners that control: an emotional climate in which learners are comfortable, supported and able to collaborate; a learning context where they have opportunities to determine their own learning needs and objectives; where scope to design and carry out their own learning plans is available; and where they have a role in evaluating their own learning. To achieve this in formal settings he advocates learning contracts. Brookfield (1995) generally goes along with this view of self-directed learning but adds that it should not be restricted to achieving selfish personal ends. It should also lead to social and political change.
Other writers (Garrison, 1992, 1997; Leach, 2000; Mezirow, 1981, 1985) outline a second, internal, dimension often overlooked in understandings of self-directed learning. This focuses on the process of making meaning on an individual and social basis. For example, in Mezirow’s theory of perspective transformation, self-directed learners move towards more inclusive meaning perspectives. As a result of significant experiences they critically reflect on current meanings, the reasons for them, changes they wish to make to them and actions they want to take as a result. This internal dimension of meaning making was evident in research conducted with a group of 25 Bachelor of Education learners (Leach, 2000). They referred to self-directed learning as making sense of a topic and developing an understanding of, and perspective on, it. One person illustrated this process when he said he “…deliberately made a choice to try and find as many perspectives as I can, to try and come to some understanding of what had actually happened here and what would be a sensible point of view” (Leach, 2000, p. 125). Many also said that talking with others was a really important part of the meaning-making process for them.

Critique

Although experiential learning is central to adult learning, it has recently been critiqued (Brookfield, 1998; Edwards & Usher, 1998; Usher et al., 1997). The following is a brief summary of some of these critiques. One, fundamental to theories about knowledge, is that our experiences are personal and we cannot generalise them. They must therefore take second place to empirically established reality. Another holds that our memories of experiences vary. Every time we tell stories of our experiences, or reflect on them, they change in some way. Related to this, is another criticism. When we tell stories based on our experiences we want to achieve specific purposes. The stories we tell change according to our purpose; they are political and cannot ever be trusted as accurate accounts. Further, in any learning situation some of our experiences are more appropriate than others and we do not automatically select the most appropriate experience. Brookfield (1998, p. 127) makes another point. Because adults have lived for 40 years does not mean that they necessarily have had many meaningful experiences useful for learning: “The old saw that 40 years’ experience is often one year repeated 40 times is undeniable.” Connected to this is the argument that for experience to become educational it has to be subjected to critical analysis, not just accepted at face value. Another critique concerns the way experiential learning authenticates the experiences of each individual. This has the effect of universalising the individual in adult learning and reduces opportunities to recognise the shared experiences of different groups such as women and Maori, New Zealand’s first people. Finally, and following from the previous critique, individual experiences do not supersede shared or group experiences as defined by, for example, socio-economic class, gender or culture.

The external dimension of self-directed learning, too, has been engulfed by criticism, from the time Knowles first proposed his ideas. Fundamental is a question as to whether adults are self-directed learners, in this external sense, at all. Candy
(1987, pp. 163–164) lists a range of reasons why adults may not wish to seek control of their learning. Many seek cues from teachers, are syllabus bound, look to others to control their learning, have little ability to learn for themselves, are field dependent, exhibit learned helplessness and “are generally docile, passive and acquiescent learners who prefer … other directedness to self direction”. The concept is also criticised for its focus on individualism, its concern with the “self”, personal freedom, choice and the validity of subjective experience (Tennant, 1988). This focus denies the importance of the collective and of human interdependence. A third criticism is related to the second. The “self” in self-directed learning is unitary, rational and de-contextualised rather than a constantly changing self, open to different interpretations. (Usher et al., 1997). Another criticism concerns self-direction’s universalising effect. It is developed from a Western, white, male, North American worldview that is assumed to apply to everyone. It ignores differences between, for example, classes, genders and ethnic cultures. Self-direction is also criticised as being reduced to a range of techniques used to facilitate adult learning; techniques that ignore the contextual nature of learning. These techniques, for example learning contracts, are frequently imposed and prescriptive (Collins, 1991).

While explicit criticism of the internal dimension is mute, the assumptions about the nature of knowledge in this dimension of self-directed learning could be critiqued by, for example, those holding a realist/rationalist view of knowledge. Self-directed learning as meaning making assumes that multiple meanings may be constructed for any experience. This can be construed as a relativist position and is opposed to a rationalist view of knowledge. According to the rationalist view, knowledge is defined as “justified true belief”, where belief in something true is necessary for knowledge and where we can know only what we believe. As some beliefs are false and cannot lead to knowledge we cannot know something that is false. The justification condition on this rationalist definition of knowledge requires that beliefs about truth be rationally appraised. “What turns true belief into knowledge is an account … which justifies or provides warrant for belief” (Siegel, 1998, p. 21). According to this view, self-directed learning as meaning making is not possible. There can be only one “justified true belief”.

**Rethinking Experiential and Self-directed Learning**

So far we have outlined some key ideas about two keystone concepts in adult learning and have summarised some criticisms of them. We find the criticisms powerful but don’t want to throw out the gold with the garbage. We want to sift through the criticisms in order to retain and develop attributes of experiential and self-directed learning. We agree with critics that too much has been made of the individual in both experiential and self-directed learning. We also agree that the universalising tendencies of experiential learning and the external dimension of self-directed learning are untenable. Indeed, we accept that the experiences of individuals are unique, selective and political and cannot be generalised. Moreover, we acknowledge that the control-seeking external dimension of self-directed learning is not necessarily an attribute of all adult learners.
However, we do want to develop further the social aspects of experiential learning and the internal dimension of self-directed learning. In short, we want to rethink experiential and self-directed learning as contextualised meaning making—constructing knowledge in distinctive settings. Meaning making is central to experiential learning and to the internal dimension of self-directed learning, connecting the two. In experiential learning it features as the process which turns experience into learning. In self-directed learning it constructs personal understandings of the world. Meaning making is also a key element in constructivist thinking, which holds that learners construct meanings from their experiences. Constructivism therefore provides the intellectual framework for rethinking self-directed and experiential learning as contextualised meaning making.

However, constructivism is not as simple as that. It has been described separately as an epistemological theory and a theory of learning, and appears in a number of different versions. “[H]owever all incorporate a view of learning that involves the learner in active, individual processes of knowledge construction based on their previous experience” (Arlidge, 2000, p. 33). Prawat (1996) identifies six different versions of constructivism. By tracing their philosophical and psychological underpinnings he situates them in either a radical or a social camp. The radical version focuses on the construction of knowledge by individuals. It is guided by two principles: knowledge is actively created by the thinking person; and the function of perception is adaptive, using personal experience to construct new knowledge. Radical constructivism does not deny that objective reality exists—merely that in constructing knowledge an individual does not access that reality. One version of the social interpretation of constructivism builds on the philosophy of Rorty (Prawat, 1996). Here, the community constructs truth through language. The world, like a literary text, is open to many interpretations. Members of communities define the nature of that text. The language they agree on is their reality. There is nothing outside of language to which individuals may refer to validate the truthfulness of the language the community has chosen to use. As language differs between communities according to culture (e.g. ethnicity, class, gender, disciplines, institutions), so the truth of knowledge is variable. Again, the existence of a reality is not denied but it cannot be known outside of language (Zepke, 2000). In our view, meaning making occurs when individuals interact with their socio-cultural milieu. Vygotsky (Prawat, 1996) saw this relationship as dialectic: the individual constructs the social and at the same time is constructed by the social. The teacher here is a social artefact who helps learners to overcome limitations. In constructivism, therefore, experiential learning and the internal dimension of self-directed learning come together as meaning making.

We don’t question that individual learning has an essential place in the adult classroom. Indeed, we accept that individuals make personal meaning from their experiences. What we do question is that individual learning enables people to reach their full learning potential. It limits how experiential and self-directed learning can be used. Where the focus is on the individual, the learner sees only a partial picture. For example, if experiences are variably recalled, if they are not always applied appropriately, if they are used to gain personal advantage, if the self-directed learner
is working in an isolated way using only the rational “self”, learning potential is severely narrowed. What is missing is meaning making that is social, made in association with others, in response to alternative views, and exposed to questioning and authentication by others. Such social learning often goes beyond the learning of individuals working alone.

Our rethought construct of contextualised meaning making has three features designed to extend the limits imposed by individualised approaches to experience and self-direction. The first feature concerns relationships between learners. When constructing meaning, learners are always connected in some way to other people. This may be through family and their past, through the media, through reading, through conversations on the bus, or serendipitous encounters with a range of others. In short, meaning making is contextualised. The second feature has a “teacher” suggest to learners new ways of interpreting their own and others’ experiences. Suggestions may be by way of questions, challenges, stories of their own experiences or reminders about meanings that may be held by other people. The “teacher” may be another learner, a serendipitous contact or an author. This feature is in line with the work of Vygotsky (Prawat, 1996), who argued that learning is maximised when there is a more knowledgeable other associated in the learning situation. The third feature incorporates critical reflection to avoid experiential meaning making becoming “an uncritical celebratory swapping of war stories and anecdotes in which all stories possess equal value, merit and significance” (Brookfield, 1998, p. 130). Through critical reflection we examine how our normal understandings of life are a constructed reality that does not necessarily possess equal value, merit and significance to the realities of others.

The first of these features, relationships between learners, is multi-layered. One layer concerns the exposed and immediate experiences of a group in a formal learning situation. Here, experiences are shared, analysed and questioned. Meaning is made out of this shared discussion. For example, the topic in one group is “what is self-directed learning?” The teacher, working out of a constructivist perspective, has set the group the task of coming up with a description/s of self-directed learning. In the discussion, personal stories from a variety of perspectives and sources emerge. From these, a range of meanings about self-directed learning surfaces. The group examines each critically, settling on one or two as being their preferred descriptions of self-directed learning. While this removes some limits from individualised learning, the outcome is still limited to what this particular group is currently conscious of.

Another layer enfolds the hidden meanings that lie behind learners’ immediate experiences, informing and shaping them. It concerns the underpinning beliefs, values, emotions and attitudes that influence individual meaning making. Such hidden individual meanings affect the way a group constructs new meanings. They create connections between group members. Such connections are also hidden, group members not being aware of their impact on group meaning making. Yet they exert profound influence, and need to be surfaced in experiential and self-directed learning. We suggest that if these hidden meanings are surfaced and connections made between group members, meaning making is enriched. For example, in an
advanced course on adult learning, a “teacher” thought gender issues were intruding on group discussions. These issues were surfaced in a discussion with the group. Connections between members of the group were forged and in subsequent work on self-directed learning the now exposed meanings were included in group meaning making.

A third layer, also hidden, consists of the experiences of “unheard voices”: groups, perspectives and knowledges not represented in the learning group. For example, in New Zealand, Maori, rural, working class, differently abled and Pacific Nation people, among others, are under-represented in higher education. Because they are not represented, we have to find ways to include their views in meaning making. Such voices are important to meaning making in a particular context. Identifying and including their ideas expands the meanings made within the group. While there are multiple voices on any subject, and we will never hear them all, group members can use their critical faculties to include as many as they can identify. In a history course, for instance, the official stories are supplemented by research into the stories of people who don’t feature in official histories, like education groups working in the non-formal sector, Maori, women’s groups.

Ensuring that all the layers of contextualised meaning making are explored is the role of the designated teacher. As the most experienced in the subject matter, she plays a vital part in both social and individual meaning making. Her positionality, all the things that make her who she is—her gender, social status, age, power, values, emotions, ethnicity, sexuality—influence how she deals with meaning making (Tisdell, 1998). To avoid her positionality becoming unduly dominating, she too must try to surface these underlying meanings and expose them to critique. As the facilitator of learning she creates an environment in which members of the group can engage in contextualised meaning making. She enables learners to share and critically reflect on experiences and their meaning; to ensure that groups delve into the hidden connections between meanings made by group members and identify where they came from; to encourage voices not represented in the group to be identified, heard and considered.

Examples from Practice

We now turn from theory to practice and describe some of the ways we apply contextualised meaning making in specific courses within Bachelor and Master of Education programs with an adult education focus.

Face to Face

One course we teach is an undergraduate study of adult learning with time-honoured topics including experiential and self-directed learning. Our own approach is critical, group centred and based on the view that individuals construct the social and, at the same time, are constructed by the social. We encourage interaction between learners and their active engagement with different meanings. Learning activities focus on learners constructing their own views of material,
presenting them to the group and discussing their implications for their own learning and teaching. These activities are often set up as projects or problems.

We use our three layers of contextualised meaning making in class. In the first layer, learners present their own meanings constructed from readings, discussions and media exposure. Through discussion, other meanings are exposed and made accessible to all members of the group who process these and integrate them, as they will, with their own. Critical questioning of all meanings is part of the process. Some kind of shared meaning emerges and is summarised, usually by one of us but not infrequently by one of the learners. One such discussion concerned theories of learning. Group members presented views from a variety of sources and in discussion made different meanings from these. After much debate, most of the group arrived at a hard-won, shared meaning while one member rejected it.

In our second layer we try to surface cognitive, emotional and spiritual hidden meanings. In our classes, emotional and spiritual meanings tend to remain hidden. We see it as our challenge to help uncover appropriate hidden meanings so that they become available to group meaning making. For example, Maori bring a strong spiritual quality to their learning, often demonstrated in *karakia* (prayer) before learning starts and at its end. They are often reluctant to surface this cultural practice in Western contexts. We now ask our Maori learners whether they would like *karakia* and, if they do, invite them to lead it. The reasons for this practice are hidden from many learners and *karakia* is not always acceptable to all members of the group. In trying to expose such hidden meanings, it is also our challenge to surface opposing views. For example, one learner constructed an entirely negative meaning from *karakia*. Rather than exposing this to the group, he hid his beliefs. This led to behaviour that limited group meaning making in regard to cultural differences. On questioning, he volunteered his belief that, as a Christian, he was uncomfortable with what he considered to be pagan practices. This exposed to the group a different interpretation of Christianity as well as of cultural differences. These had not been available before and influenced the meanings constructed by the group.

In our teaching we are aware of how selective we are in choosing authorities, ideas, opinions and theories. We want to build in the capacity to call unheard voices of our third layer into group meaning making. On one level this is orthodox academic thinking. Everywhere, learners are given bibliographies and invited to read widely. But it is more than this. It is to invite people from groups not represented to give their views in person; to brainstorm the identity of voices still not heard and construct meanings that include those that the group anticipates may be held by the unheard voices. A frequently unheard voice is that of the gay community. To include these voices, we scheduled sexuality as a content area in the course; invited gay people to address the group and facilitate the meaning-making process and constructed meanings from assumed gay perspectives. In searching for unheard voices, one dilemma we face is the representation of voices that articulate views we consider dangerous, such as holocaust deniers and prophets of economic rationalism. Nevertheless, in our practice, such views are surfaced and are also subjected to critique.
Contextualised meaning making has proved more difficult in distance learning. While it is easy to facilitate exposed meaning making and possible to accommodate unheard voices, it is almost impossible to surface hidden meanings. The challenge is to bring physically isolated learners together to create a context in which group meaning making can take place. We have adopted two strategies to overcome situations of isolation. In one, study groups work together with study guides and books of readings after a subject specialist has introduced a course. Contextualised meaning making is facilitated both by teacher modelling and through group activities suggested in the study guide. These activities mirror those used in local face-to-face classes. During teaching days we introduce the concept of unheard voices and, particularly, expose hidden meanings. For example, one suggested study group activity has learners interview up to five people on their views of self-directed learning. They bring back these views to the study group to construct their own meaning of self-directed learning. Unfortunately, one teaching day is often too short a time to establish the trust needed to work beneath the surface, and the hidden layer remains hidden.

A second strategy is to increase interaction between distance learners and between them and teachers. In the layer of exposed meaning making this is relatively easy. We use audio-conferencing and the Internet. On the Internet we range from e-mail networks to chat-rooms and searching designated Websites. All of these communication strategies are designed to enable learners to access the ideas of others. Chat-rooms are excellent venues for the exchange of ideas among learners. One of us has also opened chat-rooms to the world so that learners’ meanings can be exposed to those of World Wide Web visitors. Designated Websites yield important additional information to that contained in books of readings. Something seems to be available on any imaginable topic. Yet these methods are limited, as few learners or teachers are entirely comfortable with them. Individual learners also talk to us on the telephone or e-mail us—interactions that sometimes lead to significant, individual meaning making. Surfacing the hidden meanings of the second layer is even more difficult. Audio-conferences have not been conducive to digging into values and attitudes. So far, neither chat-rooms nor individual telecommunications have led to significant development of emotional or spiritual meaning making. Hidden voices, on the other hand, are readily discovered on the Internet. Its anarchic nature allows almost every opinion imaginable to be accessed. Recognised authorities are available at the touch of a button, as one of our students discovered when he first e-mailed, and promptly received an answer from Jack Mezirow.

Assessment

Assessment is part of learning. According to Broadfoot (1996, p. 3) “passing judgement on people, on things, on ideas, on values, is part of a process of making sense of reality and where we stand in any given situation”. It therefore plays an essential role in contextualised meaning making and is integral to our rethinking. In
assessment we try to remain open to the meanings that learners have constructed. Within prescribed learning outcomes, learners can negotiate topics for assessment, the form their evidence will take, criteria by which their evidence will be assessed and assume a partnership role with us, through self- and peer assessment, in the grading process. Contextualised meaning making’s three layers are embodied in this process. Exposed and hidden meanings as well as unheard voices are acknowledged in what we call internal fairness. This recognises the contexts of the learners and the meanings they have constructed.

Internal fairness has been theorised by Leach et al. (1999, 2000, 2001) as related to consequential validity, drawing on the work of Messick (1989, p. 19), who held “that social values cannot be ignored in considerations of validity”. To be valid, assessments must reflect their social context and consider the consequences of their use. Gipps (1994, p. 65) argues that “validity theory now suggests that inferences and uses of assessment can only be valid if interpreted in the local context”. Internal fairness enables us to judge learners’ work and their meaning making in relation to the contexts that produced it. People in different disciplines, cultures, socio-economic classes and ethnic groups often work in different paradigms involving different norms, values, practices, pasts and futures. Internal fairness enables us to welcome group assessments, the involvement of people from outside the formal classroom and the recognition of feelings and spirituality—in short, to value contextualised meaning making.

Into the Future

Our journey is incomplete. We have reconceptualised experiential learning and self-directed learning as contextualised meaning making. Our efforts to apply this in practice require further development, particularly in surfacing hidden meanings, including unheard voices and in expanding group assessment. For face-to-face teaching our vision draws on our work with Maori learners in wananga situations. A group of learners lives in, over 2 or 3 days at an agreed time and place, to learn intensively, sometimes more than 12 hours a day. Consistently we have found that these situations not only surface the three layers of meaning making but that the outcomes achieved by the group go beyond what individuals working alone would have achieved. In the short term this is difficult to achieve with Pakeha (European) learners and educators who have preconceived ideas of university learning. Increasingly we use workshop days to work towards wananga-style learning and so develop the potential of the social and multi-layered dimensions of contextualised meaning making.

Another major challenge to our vision lies in distance education. Exposed meaning making is catered for readily within our existing distance delivery methods. The Internet, in particular, provides a treasure chest of, and access to, unheard voices. But neither study guide nor audio-conference nor chat-room gives us any certainty in surfacing emotional and spiritual meanings. Yet we believe that chat-rooms could be used in the future to surface the hidden dimension of meaning making. Reported incidents of Web intimacy suggest that chat-rooms are capable of eliciting deeply
emotional interactions. In our experience, though, learners are not only reluctant to share their hidden meanings but resist entering the chat-room altogether. We have come to believe that practice makes perfect and that devising timetables and setting tasks will create a comfort in the new technological environment and thereby create the conditions in which hidden meaning will surface. After all, timetables and set tasks are part and parcel of face-to-face and *wananga*-type learning.

Nevertheless, surfacing hidden meanings has a number of ethical fish-hooks. In enriching the contextualised meaning-making process we have to remain aware of the rights of learners to privacy. So far, we have been very circumspect in encouraging learners to reveal hidden meanings but would like to learn to push the boundaries further without harming people. While we tried hard to include as many unheard voices as possible in meaning making, the practical implication of deciding which voices are to be included also poses ethical and teaching challenges. No matter how inclusive we are, some unheard voices will remain. Who decides on which voices will be included is an issue. We believe we must find ways of having learners involved in decision making about this. The Internet is very good in creating spaces for unheard voices, but not so good in helping us discriminate between them. Critical selection skills need to be developed.

In assessment we want to explore further how to involve groups more in the evaluation of group meaning making. Such groups may be drawn, for example, from employers, trade unions, ethnic groups, socio-economic groups, advocates for gender equality and the gay community. We are also developing protocols for groups’ assessment of their own meaning making. At one level this is not contentious because it happens anyway, a natural part of the learning process. It is more contentious to want to formalise it and have it count in summative assessment. To honour the gate-keeping function we will need to consult widely with students, the academic community and society at large.

We realise the tentative nature of our reconceptualisation and of our practice. We are also aware that our rethinking challenges a long-held fundamental belief in university education. This is Descartes’s dualistic view of humanity immortalised in his aphorism “I think therefore I am.” We see the nature of being, and therefore the focus of education, to be emotional, spiritual, social and physical as well as intellectual. Our vision is to incorporate the whole of being into contextualised meaning making.

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