

**Through their eyes:
Experiences of early professional learners
in collecting institutions**

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Bachelor of Arts (Hons)

Graduate Diploma in Archives Administration

Master of Educational Leadership

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Faculty of Arts and Design

University of Canberra, Australia

October 2010

Abstract

This thesis presents an interpretive study of professional learning in collecting institutions such as archives, galleries, libraries and museums. The intention of the study is to explore and understand the perceptions, expectations and experiences of information professionals as they embark on new positions, participate in and emerge from initial professional learning experiences in collecting institutions. The study, conducted between 2006 and 2008, followed 16 individuals working in collecting institutions at various career stages as they became familiar with a new work environment, new responsibilities, and new relationships. The study sought to capture and understand how their learning experiences over a two year period helped them apply professional principles, and build skills and knowledge. The setting of collecting institutions was chosen because the researcher, through being a practitioner, educator and supervisor developing individuals in a collecting institution for over 25 years, could see unresolved issues about how early professional learners navigated their new environments.

The study adopted interpretive qualitative research methodologies, using in-depth, semi-structured interviews to understand experiences and expectations through the eyes of individuals. There was a longitudinal aspect to the study as research participants were interviewed on three separate occasions to mark different milestones over a two-year period.

The significance of the study is that it places the experiences of the individual at the centre, rather than examining how collecting institutions implemented learning and development programs. The study found that the research participants valued the opportunity to undertake

internships, volunteer and paid work while studying towards formal qualifications. The study found a rich array of learning experiences to build professional knowledge over the two years through formal and informal ways. The research participants changed positions and duties much more in the first two years than they had expected, especially in stepping up to supervision, training and mentoring others for the first time. Few received training in how to perform these roles, which has implications for how professional knowledge is transferred in the workplace. The study found that participants' relationships with supervisors, peers and mentors had a major influence on their access to learning experiences. Mentoring emerged to be much more organic and participant driven than presented in the literature.

The study hoped to contribute to the understanding of how early professional learners experienced that situation, what they valued and their views on what could be improved. This study has given them a voice to reveal what was important to them about working in collecting institutions, how they navigated those early years and how they built their professional knowledge. Their voice heard, others can learn and build relationship-rich, diverse, flexible and enabling environments for those early years.

Acknowledgements

A thesis is never completed in isolation and many deserve my heartfelt thanks. Families are most precious and my husband, Michael and children Tristan and Rachel were patient and supportive to the end and sacrificed much so that I could finish. My mother Jenny Liney was a constant sounding board and critic of my assumptions and my mother-in-law, Elma Hoy provided fresh eyes through valuable ‘does it make sense’ reading.

A thousand thanks go to my friends, especially to Alli Burness, Del Clayton, Susan Cooke, Dr Ted Ling and Dr Sigrid McCausland who gave me unconditional support, assisted with the numerous drafts and never tired of listening to the sometimes minutiae of progress. I could not have had a better team of advisors. Rosemary Jennings, a former professional colleague assisted with the editorial process, for which I am very grateful.

While they must remain anonymous, my gratitude goes to the collecting institutions and the research participants who made this thesis possible. They remained committed to being involved and I learned much from them.

I would like to thank my primary supervisor Adjunct Professor, Peter Clayton and my supervisory panel, Deputy-Vice Chancellor Education, Carole Kayrooz of the University of Canberra and Professor Karen Anderson of Mid-Sweden University for believing in me every step of the way and for always being available for advice. Thanks to Dr Ting Wang of the University of Canberra for her invaluable guidance – her dissertation was a constant companion.

Thanks go to the members of Research Support Office at University of Canberra who were an ongoing source of advice about the administrative processes and the Research Services Office who provided invaluable learning experiences to help me develop my research skills.

My two employers through this candidature, the National Archives of Australia and the Records Management Association of Australasia, gave me full and constant support to embark on and complete this study. I remain grateful to my work and professional colleagues, in Australia and overseas, for being continual sources of encouragement.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction and overview	1
1.1 Intention of the research study	1
1.1.1 Background of the study	1
1.1.2 Methodology and limitations	2
1.2 Context of collecting institutions	3
1.3 Professions and professional associations	5
1.4 Impetus and rationale for the study	6
1.4.1 Qualifications and work-based learning experiences	7
1.4.2 Employment and career expectations	7
1.4.3 Learning experiences	8
1.4.4 Relationships as sources of learning	9
1.5 Research questions	9
1.6 Significance and contribution of the study	10
1.7 Outline of the thesis	11
Chapter 2: Literature review	15
2.1 Learning principles and frameworks	15
2.1.1 Adult learning principles	16
2.1.2 Learning in the workplace	19
2.1.3 Learning cycles	22
2.2 Employment and career environment	24
2.2.1 Employment trends	24
2.2.2 Personal development plans	26
2.2.3 Career development	27
2.2.4 Professional knowledge landscape	30
2.2.5 Disciplines and professions relating to the information sector	30
2.2.6 Education in the information disciplines	32
2.2.7 Professional knowledge and competency frameworks	33

2.3	Learning and development	36
2.3.1	Internships, volunteer work experience and induction	36
2.3.2	Continuing professional development	41
2.3.3	Learning pathways and outcomes model	45
2.4	Relationships in workplace and professional contexts.....	49
2.4.1	Supervisory relationships	50
2.4.2	Mentoring relationships	52
2.4.3	Workplace groups and teams	59
2.4.4	Professional associations and communities	60
2.4.5	Matrix of support for learning in the workplace	61
2.5	Theoretical framework for early professional learning in collecting institutions	64
2.6	Chapter summary	66
Chapter 3: Methodological framework.....		67
3.1	Methodological traditions	67
3.1.1	Constructionist epistemology.....	68
3.1.2	Interpretative perspective	69
3.1.3	Research design for a qualitative longitudinal case study	71
3.2	Research methods and techniques.....	74
3.2.1	Selection of research participants	74
3.2.2	Profile of participants.....	77
3.2.3	Use of in-depth semi structured interviews	79
3.3	Data collection and analysis procedures	81
3.3.1	Conduct of pilot interviews.....	81
3.3.2	Preliminary arrangements for the interviews	82
3.3.3	Conduct of the interviews	82
3.3.4	Analysis of research data	87
3.4	Dependability, credibility and transferability of the research	90
3.4.1	Dependability of the research procedures.....	92
3.4.2	Credibility, transferability and confirmability of the research.....	93
3.5	Limitations of the research methods	95
3.6	Ethical considerations	99
3.7	Chapter summary	100

Chapter 4:	Findings about working experiences	103
4.1	Experience and education brought to new positions.....	104
4.1.1	Educational qualifications.....	105
4.1.2	Internships.....	106
4.1.3	Volunteer or paid, full time, part time and casual work	110
4.1.4	Recruitment processes	113
4.1.5	Need for personal adjustment to take up new position	115
4.1.6	Employment status upon starting new position	116
4.2	Getting used to the new work environment	121
4.2.1	First impressions	121
4.2.2	Roles and responsibilities	124
4.2.3	Impact of personal development plans	130
4.3	Changes in roles and responsibilities	136
4.3.1	Changes in areas of professional interest.....	137
4.3.2	Stepping up to leadership, supervision, training and mentoring.....	139
4.4	Tracking work movement and expectations.....	144
4.4.1	Expectations about working environments.....	144
4.4.2	Role of relationships in setting and meeting expectations.....	149
4.4.3	Reflections on future expectations.....	151
4.5	Expectations about career directions.....	153
4.5.1	Initial reflections about career expectations	154
4.5.2	Attitudes and changes towards career expectations.....	156
4.5.3	Analysis of findings about career expectations	157
4.6	Chapter summary	160
Chapter 5:	Findings about learning experiences.....	163
5.1	Findings about learning experiences	164
5.1.1	Mapping learning experiences to the Learning Model	164
5.1.2	Vignettes of learning experiences of selected research participants.....	173
5.1.3	Discussion on mapping learning experiences to the Learning Model	179
5.1.4	Sources of learning experiences of research participants	181
5.2	Suggestions about future learning and development.....	183
5.2.1	Mapping research participants' suggestions to the Learning Model	183

5.2.2	Discussion of issues emerging from suggestions.....	186
5.2.3	Comparison of learning experiences with suggestions for the future.....	194
5.3	Reflections on the value of continuing to learn.....	197
5.4	Analysis of findings about learning experiences.....	203
5.5	Emerging themes about the aims of early professional learning	206
5.6	Chapter summary	210
Chapter 6:	Findings about relationships	211
6.1	Relationships with supervisors and managers.....	211
6.1.1	Characteristics of supervisory relationships	212
6.1.2	Impact of supervisory relationships on early professional learning	215
6.2	Working with the team and buddies.....	217
6.3	Perceptions and experiences of mentoring relationships	219
6.4	First time supervisory, training and mentoring roles	227
6.5	Relationships with professional communities.....	229
6.6	Analysis of findings about relationships	231
6.7	Chapter summary	236
Chapter 7:	Discussion and conclusions	239
7.1	Analysis of findings against research questions.....	239
7.1.1	Contribution of experiences and education.....	240
7.1.2	Initial experiences and expectations in the workplace.....	244
7.1.3	Developing professional knowledge through learning	259
7.1.4	Experiences that shaped changes between the first and second years	264
7.1.5	Observations about tracking learning over time	271
7.1.6	Perspectives on improvements to learning	275
7.2	Limitations of the study.....	277
7.2.1	Consideration of the sample.....	277
7.2.2	Application of the findings beyond the study	278
7.3	Contribution of the study to theory and practice.....	283
7.3.1	Contribution to the literature about early professional learning	283
7.3.2	Contribution to practice in collecting institutions and the professions.....	298
7.4	Directions for future research.....	303
7.4.1	A change in focus for induction.....	304

7.4.2	Developing positive attitudes towards personal development plans	306
7.4.3	Mentoring relationship models for the workplace and professions	306
7.4.4	Collaboration to provide cross-domain learning.....	308
7.4.5	Flexible career models	309
7.5	Final summary.....	310
	References.....	315
	Appendices.....	337
	Appendix A: Sample letter of invitation to collecting institution.....	337
	Appendix B: Information distributed to potential research participants.....	339
	Appendix C: Research participant consent form	342
	Appendix D: Interview schedule	343
	Appendix E: Summary profiles of research participants	346
	Appendix F: Expectations about employment over the first year.....	354
	Appendix G: Expectations about employment over the second year	355
	Appendix H: Expectations about experiences over the first year	356
	Appendix I: Expectations about experiences over the second year.....	357
	Appendix J: Reflections on career expectations over the two years.....	358

List of figures

Figure 2.1: Learning pathways and outcomes model for the information professions.....	47
Figure 2.2: Matrix of support and challenge for new professionals in the workplace.....	62
Figure 2.3: Theoretical framework for early professional learning in collecting institutions .	65
Figure 3.1: Elements of a research framework	68
Figure 4.1: Typical characteristics of research participants starting out	120
Figure 4.2: Typical characteristics of research participants two years on	143
Figure 5.1: Learning pathways and outcomes model (Learning Model).....	165
Figure 5.2: Experiences mapped to Quadrant A: Competency-based learning	166
Figure 5.3: Experiences mapped to Quadrant B: Operational learning	168
Figure 5.4: Experiences mapped to Quadrant C: Reflective learning	170
Figure 5.5: Experiences mapped to Quadrant D: Externally-directed learning.....	172
Figure 5.6: Melissa’s learning experiences.....	174
Figure 5.7: Sophie’s learning experiences	175
Figure 5.8: Liam’s learning experiences.....	176
Figure 5.9: Nadia’s learning experiences.....	177
Figure 5.10: Tanya’s learning experiences	178
Figure 5.11: Overlap of sources and options for early professional learning	182
Figure 5.12: Suggestions relating to accredited study	184
Figure 5.13: Suggestions for improvements for operational and reflective learning	185
Figure 5.14: Word cloud highlighting learning experiences of the research participants	195
Figure 5.15: Word cloud highlighting suggestions for learning experiences	196
Figure 5.16: Reflections about the value of continuing to learn.....	201
Figure 6.1: Relationships of early professional learners.....	232
Figure 7.1: Matrix of support and challenge for early professional learners.....	249
Figure 7.2: Changing complexity of professional learning	273
Figure 7.3: Learning Model with examples from research data	284
Figure 7.4: Cycles of learning and working.....	288
Figure 7.5: Guiding framework for early professional learners	296

List of tables

Table 3.1: Questions that tracked expectations for specific milestones	84
Table 4.1: Years of formal study undertaken by research participants.....	106
Table 4.2: Features of the internships undertaken by participants.....	108
Table 4.2: Summary of public sector position levels and roles	117
Table 4.3: Initial employment levels and roles of participants	117
Table 4.4: Roles relating to the description and preservation of collection material	126
Table 4.5: Roles relating to reference and education services.....	127
Table 4.6: Roles in developing exhibitions and outreach programs	128
Table 4.7: Summary of supervisory, training and mentoring roles	140
Table 4.8: Expectations and reflections about employment over the first year.....	146
Table 4.9: Expectations and reflections about employment over the second year	147
Table 4.10: Expectations about experiences over the first year.....	148
Table 4.11: Expectations about experiences over the second year.....	149
Table 4.12: Role of relationships in setting and meeting expectations.....	150
Table 4.13: Reflections on career expectations over the two years.....	156
Table 6.1: Mentoring relationships of the research participants.....	220