

Theme:

The interplay between the workplace as a learning environment and learning in life history

The place of workplace learning in learning lives: a case study

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Abstract:

At least in the English language literature, studies of workplace learning almost always centre on the workplace itself. More recently, attempts have been made to integrate the significance of individual worker/learners lives and dispositions within such place-orientated studies. In this paper we change the focus, by considering the relationship of workplace learning and individuals from the perspective of the individual. That is, we consider the place, nature and significance of workplace learning within the life history of an individual person. The paper draws upon the Learning Lives research project. This is a three year longitudinal study of learning in relation to identity and agency. It combines life history, longitudinal qualitative research in real time, and the analysis of existing panel survey data. In this paper we use the story of one person to show how workplace learning relates to the others parts of a life. We conclude by exploring ways in which this relationship can be conceptualised and understood.

Introduction

When studying the relationship between work and learning, the central focus is almost always upon the workplace. Early work centred upon the ways in which workers, often professionals, learned through what Argyris and Schon (1974, 1978) and Schon (1983) termed reflective practice. Their work showed how professionals used their on-going experiences of work to develop their professional expertise. Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) similarly focused on ways in which expertise develops through work practice. Following this attention shifted to focus on the nature of those working practices through which workers (including non-professionals) learned. In those versions of situated learning following Lave and Wenger (1991), and in activity theory work following Engestrom (2001) the focus shifted away from the workers themselves. More recently we have arguably entered a third phase, where an awareness of the situated nature of workplace learning remains, but it is seen as important to incorporate individual workers back into the picture. Much of the Roskilde research can be seen as of this type. Other examples include Billet and Sommerville (2004), Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) and Evans et al. (2006). However, even when such research focuses on individuals and learning at work, it is the workplace that is foregrounded and other parts of their lives are studied in relation to that central workplace focus.

In this paper we take a different perspective. We argue that it is equally logical and equally important to understand workplace learning within the context of a person's life. That is, we centre on the learning lives of people, and see workplace learning as an important part of that. This entails the integration of two different dimensions. Firstly, at any one time, a person's workplace learning can be usefully understood as a part of their wider living and learning. Working and learning at work, always run alongside other important life arenas, such as family, local community, leisure etc., where learning also takes place. Secondly, workplace learning can usefully be seen within the on-going life course. Over a person's life, working contexts and consequently the nature and significance of workplace learning change, sometimes dramatically. (See Arthur et al., 1999, for details about people's changing careers and work engagements.)

The opportunity to examine workplace learning from this perspective, and awareness of the need to do so, arose as we were engaged in the Learning Lives research project. This is a large-scale longitudinal study, funded by ESRC, as part of its Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). The project is a partnership between teams in the universities of Exeter, Brighton, Leeds and Stirling. What follows is based mainly on data collected by the Leeds team. The main focus of Learning Lives is on the interrelationships between learning, identity and agency in the life course. We seek to understand how identity and agency impact upon learning dispositions, practices and achievements; and we seek to understand how different forms and practices of learning impact upon identity and agency. A sample of 120 people have all been interviewed about six times, over a three and a half year period. These interviews focus on the place of learning in their life histories, and also track their dispositions towards and participation in learning in real time, during the life of the project¹. In what follows, we focus on the life experiences of one of the older men in our sample: William Moore. We use his story to illustrate the changing nature of his workplace learning, and the changing relationship between that learning and other parts of his life.

William Moore – workplace learning related to life history

William Moore was born into a traditional mining community in the 1940s. His father was a coalface worker, his mother a pillar of the church, the Girl Guides and various women's organisations. He was the first of his family to go to grammar school. His parents were keen that their two sons should not work in the mines. They encouraged without having any real grasp of the education process. For William grammar school was somewhat problematic. It set him apart from his peers in the community, the Scouts and the church youth club. He says he didn't take full advantage of the opportunity preferring to focus on local friends and football to academic work. He left at 16 with 3 GCE O-level passes, the best grade in art. Comments from his later life reveal that he had also

¹ The Learning Lives project is also engaged in analysis of the British Household Panel survey data, but that is not addressed in this paper.

absorbed quite a lot about grammar and language, maths and technology, all of which were useful in his working life.

Following his education he was expected to get a white collar job, and started training in a sales and marketing position in a local clothing company. He left, dissatisfied, after nine months feeling he wasn't suited to sales and that he wanted to work in the nearby big-city (home of the football team he supported). Something may have rubbed off as, in later life, the success of his business partly depended upon his selling ability.

He considers that his family and community background helped to provide him with a firm foundation for life, but also feels that the mining community background was narrow in its outlook. William sees in his early adult life a broadening of his previous understanding and horizons.

He saw an advert for a trainee textile designer and draughtsman in the city, applied and got the job, partly through his better than average education. There was a comment that they didn't usually see grammar school boys. The move allowed him to apply his interests in art and design, technology and machinery, and set him up for his life's career.

He started work as a knitter working the machines, and then setting up the machines – by this route he learned the capability of the machines and how they used the threads to create the patterns. At the same time he was sent on college courses. One helped him to understand the machines better. The second, a textile design course, was less useful as it taught design for specific machines that William did not use, and the lecturer was disparaging of the type of machines where William worked. William sees workplace training as of greater value and utility than college courses. It is in the workplace that he learned about machinery, draughtsmanship and what could go wrong. Work colleagues were seen as supportive and knowledgeable, unlike college staff. This workplace learning underpinned his later success in self-employment.

He moved to the design room.

I was taking designs and setting them out on special paper and – and showing how the threads ran through to make a particular design. And then reducing it to figures so that the machine could be set up to make that particular design.

There,

a person came into my life who really changed it, actually. Cos I didn't have any particular views on anything, only very juvenile schoolboy ones, and one day another designer came and joined us, it was a man a bit older than me, who I'd never met anyone like him before, because I came from a small mining community, and this bearded character walked in He'd been a pavement artist in Brussels.

This “bohemian”, John, acted informally as William's mentor, not only helping him learn the work (they worked closely from the start, John producing the designs and William setting them up for the machines). He also provided the broader outlook on life that William welcomed. John was politically active and encouraged William in cultural

pursuits, particularly reading and music. He started William off learning the cornet and joining a brass band – the starting point for a lifelong interest in music. Meanwhile William was also treading the traditional British working class path of courting a local girl, getting married and starting married life in his parents house (without, as he said, a lot of thought for the future).

Around this time John suggested that he and William set up their own freelance textile design partnership. This they did, fairly rapidly building up a good customer base in the area. William was eventually able to afford a house, but his marriage didn't last, perhaps because his wife was not looking to broader horizons as William now was. The design partnership didn't last either. After a year John's enthusiasm waned. He took a part-time job which would allow him to go back to painting. William was left with company and customers. He panicked initially, but encouraged by clients who valued his work, found he could manage the design side as well, working from home.

Whilst building up the business, William continued his political and cultural development, joining protest marches, both with and without the brass band. Through these activities he met the woman who became his life long partner. Initially they lived together: "not so common in those days." She encouraged his ever broadening outlook on life. A friend invited them to Pamplona in Spain for a visit. They liked it a lot, she bought a caravan and they moved over there for the summer and lived in the van in Franco's rural Spain, and started to learn Spanish. They returned to UK for her to continue her teaching job, buying a flat in the city from which he continued to conduct his business. They made other visits to the Pamplona area and William established contact with a textile company there, starting to work on designs for their machines. They recommended him to firms in Catalonia, where there was a demand for William's designs. The Mediterranean life style appealed, and they had no children then.

My hand was forced, really, ... because my wife then got a job teaching in an English school in Barcelona. The die was cast... it was all very new and all very interesting and also, not very easy either, it wasn't, all living away from home, in a different place.

They lived in Barcelona, mixing with ex-pats, experiencing the revival of democracy in Spain. There was plenty of work for William in Spain though he maintained relations with his British clients as well. He had no problems selling himself, his designs and his technical know-how.

When his partner became pregnant they considered returning to Britain but liking the lifestyle and having so much local work they decided to stay and bought a house in a small town further north. All the while they were learning to adapt to the Spanish way of doing things, and to fit in with Spanish law and a changing political situation. William's legal position was tenuous, as far as work and family was concerned - though nobody else seemed bothered. They had to go back to England to get married, and it took a long time to get the papers through to formalise William's Spanish work status. Eventually he was able to buy a house in Spain. Meanwhile the availability of work just got better. By working a few days a week for one local firm he was able to meet other people in the

industry and keep up with new technology as it happened. In the end he had so much freelance work that he restricted his time with the firm.

...the new machinery became computerised. Which meant that, whereas on a conventional mechanical machine the change of pattern may have taken... easily three days, now, in theory, if I did my work right, they could change it in 10 minutes, by just changing a cassette. ... Once they'd bought this expensive machinery they could change patterns much more regularly, which meant a lot more work for me. Because the machine became a lot more sophisticated, a lot more threads in it, so there were bigger patterns, and there were more of them. So I was suddenly very busy.... all the time I was working – I was a one man industry.

As well as learning to live in Spain, he had to learn Spanish and Catalan, in an area of renewed Catalan nationalism. This was done almost entirely without books or lessons, and facilitated his business as well as family life. His wife's sister lived in Italy and through visiting her he was also able to build up a client base there. To this end he learnt Italian. This time, in contrast, he used a very traditional grammar book which he found suited him, fitting in with the way he'd been taught grammar at school.

In the 10 years since he'd come to Spain he'd had no chance to practice his cornet playing, but as they became established in the community, with two sons at the local school, he learned that the local Catalan dance band were short of a trumpet player, so he taught himself to play the trumpet and spent summer weekends playing semi-professionally. Although it added to his heavy work load, when the family eventually returned to England it was the band that he missed most.

It was his wife's decision to move back to the UK, this time for the sake of the boys' secondary education. They left in the year of the Barcelona Olympics, a very good time to sell property on the Costa Brava. They chose not to return to their roots or to the south but chose a northern rural area and answered an advert from a builder who would provide a flat whilst he built their house. William's work could be done anywhere. He didn't renew contact with English firms as they had plenty of designers. "I did make regular trips back to Barcelona and sometimes to Milan, to see clients, I saw them at trade fairs, and business carried on more or less as it had in Spain." His wife, who'd been a successful English teacher in Spain, was also able to resume her teaching career.

Gradually William's part of the textile industry went into decline in Europe, with the base moving to the Far East. His client firms became slow to pay, eventually closing down, sending their machinery to the developing areas. A second problem arose for William. Computerisation progressed but he no longer had the opportunity to work with the new systems, in particular a very expensive new computer programme. As a result he was now only been able to offer designs, without providing the technical support to make the designs work on the machines. William's main (Catalonian) client then closed down, leaving him having to sell himself and his services again, which he disliked doing. He was now only finding occasional customers, was resentful that his skill and expertise were no longer required, and regretting that he was no longer a productive craftsman and valued expert. There seemed to be no way for an isolated self-employed craftsman to

learn to use the new technology. He could not gamble on buying it and teaching himself, without some guarantee that it would result in orders. It was too expensive.

Alongside the resentment there has been a degree of acceptance. He had put in long hours for most of his working life, mainly working alone. Now, at the age of 60, he was ready to slow down a bit. He had a strong social life featuring music, sports and renewing old friendships. He tried to see the setback “as an opportunity to do something different, and to perhaps get out of working from home.” Alongside looking for textile design work he started looking for a part-time job in a different field. This involved going to job centres, career guidance and attending a course for “people of mature years thinking of making a change of direction in their life.” The latter “pointed out to you... the learning that you had picked up over the years, and your experience, which it’s easy to take for granted.” He wrote a CV for the first time in his life, and was provided with opportunities for further courses. He took the opportunity to expand his self taught computer skill in order to gain a paper qualification, with a view to a job, although he also enjoyed the experience of meeting others on the course and finding out what other things he could use his computer for. William was now at a crossroads between continuing to work in the declining field he had been in for years, which also involved working in isolation, but which had good financial rewards if you could get them, or moving in a new and less stressful direction with new opportunities for companionship.

A year later, his design business was only just ticking over. There had been disappointments where he thought his expertise was wanted and thought he might get the chance to work with the modern computer programme, but in the end he was left trying to sell his designs without the technical application. There was one offer of a job in China which he found exciting and tempting, but he concluded that it was too late in life for such a dramatic move, especially as he had just started a part-time job in a music shop that he was really enjoying.

He was not ready to give up work completely especially as it would result in his having to cut back on his lifestyle, but before the music shop vacancy cropped up, he feared he would end up serving in a local garage or grocery store. Then he saw an advert in the newspaper for

...a small company, oh I did actually know of them and I’d had dealings with them sometime ago, who supply music... And they were looking for someone to work part-time with them, which was in a very pleasant part of the countryside, some 20 minutes away from my home. And there was a list of requirements and I seemed to fulfill them. And I applied for the job, went for an interview and was successful. So I was quite pleased at 61 to find something in a field that I’m particularly interested in [music] and I started just over two weeks ago. I’m thoroughly enjoying the interesting work...I’m also enjoying having work colleagues.

...basically my job is answering the phone, talking to the public and taking their orders for sheet music and helping them when they’re not quite sure what they want or whether we’ve got it in stock.

The job relates to his earlier life through his use of computers and his knowledge of music. His Spanish has been valuable with overseas customers. But perhaps most important has been that his attitude and values have fit those of an old fashioned firm which aims to help and satisfy its customers.

Well, I think [accumulated experience of adult life]'s given me a self confidence to deal with people, which wasn't anything that came naturally to me with my upbringing. I've even been required at times to use my Spanish to speak with clients abroad, those in Spain.... I think working for yourself does give you self-confidence to do things off your own back as they say without having to refer all the time to superiors.

my knowledge of music and instruments, particularly brass instruments, has been very useful and a general knowledge of music always helps if you know who the composers are or ... who wrote a certain piece and that obviously facilitates a lot.

I've always preferred to offer quality and a good job, and if it's taken me more time and therefore been less remunerative... I mean that's far more satisfying than knowing that you've not done 100%, and that's the same attitude of this company that I'm working for now.

being freelance and having maintained myself and my family and to quite a reasonable level, [pauses] that's really important to me. But I mean I've done that now, I've proved that.... I made it for 38 years [laughs] doing something that was enjoyable, satisfying, as long as I maintained that standard of always doing my best. That's something I hope I'm taking into the new project.

Getting this job reduced the stress of struggling to maintain his self employed business. Although it does not pay nearly so well he is enjoying the work, the fact that he is not in finally responsible, and working in company. He is slightly concerned about what he would do if there was a sudden upturn in the textile design business, because he wouldn't have time to do much - but he doesn't think it's likely. He describes in detail how he has gradually learned the new job, settled in and progressed to become a valuable employee.

during the first two months or so I was helped out a lot, but since then I've been taking on the full responsibility of what the job entails.

and I certainly have been busy at times, but I've managed to come through it and I think I am a valued member of the small company that I work for now. I'm dealing with the public as well so it's quite nice talking to people of different backgrounds, people who know nothing about what they are wanting to order and people that obviously know a lot more than I do [laughs], so it's nice to help one lot and to learn from the other

In the initial stage virtually everything people asked for was new to me, but now, a large amount of it I know where and what they're looking for straight away and I'm able to help and ask the right questions and help them with their answers because they

don't always know, and know about the different instruments and the pitch that the instrument's in, the clef that they may want to read it in, and, there's any number of variations that they might request, and they don't really know exactly what they want, I should say. I try to prompt them a little bit.

I know where to look to find out the information that people require. Or I may have to go and physically fetch the music from the shelf and explain to them something in it. Even sing, at times.

He describes his learning through life in a way that is equally apposite for many of our Learning Lives subjects:

I tend to drift into things, and not realise that one is learning things, really, but I suppose when you look back on it I obviously I have learnt a lot of things through my life, but it's trying to find out, trying to pick them out and say, "oh, yes, that was an actual learning experience rather than just everything is, life in general, daily, going about your business. As in my case it's not been a formal learning, there's not many qualifications there. As I say, it's trying to specify exactly what has been a true learning experience, as opposed to just daily living.

Discussion

William's story illustrates the complex relationships between learning at/for work and other parts of his life. It also shows how these complex relationships alter over time. In making sense of this complexity, we start by drawing attention to the significance of gender and social class. In many ways, William's story typifies that of an upwardly mobile working class man. His early family life in a mining community was archetypally working class, until breached by his attendance at a middle class grammar school. As well as bringing some educational benefits, this brought real tensions around social relations and identity for William. The strength of this working class identity can be seen in William's rejection of office work in favour of manufacturing. His clear preferences for learning on the job are shared by many other working class men. However, his grammar school education had sparked interests not conventional in white male working class communities. His choice of textiles work was related to his interests and ability in art. His contacts with John and, much later, his second wife expanded his more middle class interests and life style. This directly contributed to the break up of his first marriage. However, it is interesting that his passion for music developed through playing in a brass band. In the UK, such bands are strongly working class and male, and often closely linked with mining communities, like the one where William was brought up.

As well as relating to changes in William's social and geographical identity, his career and work-related learning can only be understood in relation to wider historical changes through which he lived. These include the UK policy of providing grammar school education for brighter working class children in the 1950s, the relaxing of public attitudes towards living together without being married, the growth of computerized design in the textile industry, the changing political geography of Spain and Europe, and the migration of manufacturing to the far east, within globalization. That is, William's workplace

learning story is of its time and place – those of other generations, or living in different cultures and communities, would be different.

It is also clear from William's story that his workplace learning is closely related to learning in other parts of his life, including learning at school. His love of art developed both in school and through his work, and the success of his business was a result of his ability to combine that with continually developing technical know how, and business sense. Thus, his short period as a white collar worker was also valuable in contributing to his major career. The links between learning at work and learning in other parts of his life can be seen in his successful move to Spain. His understanding of grammar from his school days helped in learning Italian and possibly Spanish and Catalan, and the need to learn these languages and to learn Spanish practices were important in his family life and his work. For many years, William's work and his love of music were separate parts of his life. However, these things also came together when he took his most recent job, working in a music shop. His ability to deal with people, and his administrative and business sense, and his computer expertise, which had developed in his earlier career as a textile designer, contributed to his new and in many ways very different work.

Other people are also important in contributing to William's working life and learning. Both John and his second wife were highly influential in helping William do things he might not otherwise have done. More generally, William's business success as a designer was sustained by his network of contacts and clients, and through his part-time work in a manufacturing firm. It is the relative isolation of being self employed that William was pleased to lose, when he took up the job in the music shop, where much of his pleasure comes from working with others – colleagues and customers. When he faced the crisis of his failing business, the support of fellow course students and of expert tutors and advisers were helpful in making the eventual move. They widened his horizons, and showed him how to write a CV and plan a job application.

Throughout William's career, a unifying factor has been his determination to a good job, to take pride in his work and in his service to others. This was a contributor to his success in business, until external changes undermined his market position. This attitude is common within craftsmen of the same generation and William.

Workplace Learning Careers

Hodkinson and Bloomer (2002) argued that there was an important longitudinal dimension to a person's workplace learning. Drawing upon their earlier work in learning in English Further Education, they argued that this longitudinal dimension could be conceptualized as a 'learning career'. This term was a shorthand label for four integrated claims. They were (i) that individuals agentially constructed their own learning, through interactions with experiences they encountered, in a workplace or on a course. (ii) This agentic action had a significant longitudinal dimension, so that a person's approaches to learning developed and changed over time, often in ways that were non-linear and only partly unpredictable. (iii) All people develop a battery of dispositions, which are

embodied and partly tacit, which orientate them towards lived experiences and challenges, including learning. These dispositions are often enduring, but can and do change. (iv) A person's dispositions towards workplace learning or a college course are directly influenced by their life and experiences outside college, as well as within it.

Within this conceptual framework they used some of Bourdieu's thinking, especially his concept of habitus, to overcome the risk of an exaggerated emphasis agency, and to integrate with it issues of social structure. For Bourdieu, the dispositions that make up the habitus are a way of representing social structures acting through and within us, rather than forming merely an external context for agentic actions (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). In William's case, we can see clearly how his values, beliefs and actions are interpenetrated by his changing and therefore ambiguous social class position, but also by his maleness. William Moore's story provides a real life example of the sorts of issue that Hodkinson and Bloomer were writing about. Through his and other stories in the Learning Lives project, it becomes possible to further develop some of that early learning careers thinking. In doing so, we focus on an idea found elsewhere in Bloomer and Hodkinson's (2000) work, namely that learning careers are made up of complex interrelationships between continuity and change.

The significance of both continuity and change is self-evident in William's story. Furthermore, change is of at least two types. There is what might be termed more routine-type change, for example as his working skills and knowledge develop, through his engagement with progressively changing computer technology. Then there are more major relatively sudden changes or turning points (Strauss, 1962), as when he moves into his own business, initially in partnership with John, when he moves to Spain with his partner, when he returns to England for the education of his sons, and when he takes on a part-time job in the music shop. Yet, as we have already observed, there are significant continuities throughout all these changes.

These processes of continuity and change can be artificially split into three dimensions, as a way of understanding William's workplace learning career. They are William's position(s) in work and life; the learning cultures through which he learns; and his dispositions to work, life and learning. Each of these entails the integration of structure and agency.

Positions

There are several different ways of describing William's positions, all of which have significance for his workplace learning career. We have already drawn attention to his historical position within a particular generation and to his social position as a white initially working class man. The generation he is part of has lived and is living through changing positions in a rapidly changing world. In terms of social position, we have already shown how William's story of upward mobility is composed of both continuity and change.

William's family position also changes, in ways which influence his workplace learning career. He moves from living with his parents to his first marriage, then through divorce

to his second long-lasting partnership and eventual marriage. Through both marriages, he retains his position as husband and important breadwinner, and later becomes a father. Equally obvious in William's story are changes in his geographical position – from mining village to nearby city, from England to Spain and back to England, now in a rural community.

Finally, his position in work changes, as he moves from pupil to worker, then from being employed to running his own business, and eventually back into employment, in the music shop. But again, as we have seen, there are deeper continuities running through these various job position changes, related to the types of work William does, and to his own approaches to those working practices (see below).

Often, it makes most sense to think of William's position(s) as a reflection of his relationships to wider social structures. However, there is an agentic dimension to them also, as can be seen in the ways he actively works for changes in position, both consciously (moving to Spain, taking a job in the music shop), and more subconsciously (as in his pursuit of interests that distance him from his working class origins).

Learning Cultures

Hodkinson et al. (In Press) argue that learning occurs through participation in different learning cultures. By learning culture, they mean the cultural practices through which people can learn, in any location – including work. In any workplace, the learning culture enables some learning, but constrains or even prevents other learning. Of course, this work builds upon a now large body of research which shows that workplace practices are a prime determinant of workplace learning, some of which was referred to in the introduction. William's story shows the value of thinking about other learning cultures, in addition to that at work. The different learning cultures that he participated in include school, family and leisure (the band) as well as workplaces. As William's position changes, he moves from one learning culture to another. However, there are continuities across and similarities between those learning cultures, as well as equally important differences between them. These learning cultures themselves change over time. In William's story this is most obvious in relation to his work as a textile designer, where he is continually learning to work with new computer programmes, until there comes a point at which a new very expensive programme is inaccessible to him. The affordances of his workplace learning culture have significantly changed, in ways that are unhelpful to him.

As with positions, it is clear that the nature of learning cultures are partly structural. Their practices are strongly influenced by issues of social structure, and often serve to reproduce social inequalities. However, there are agentic dimensions to learning cultures also. Participants in those cultures contribute to their nature, just as the participants' actions are also shaped by those cultural practices. Hodkinson et al. (In Press) use Bourdieu's concept of field, to explain how learning cultures function in this way.

Dispositions

William's dispositions towards work and learning also demonstrate the significance of continuity and change. Continuity can be seen in his career focus on creativity (design

then music); his lifelong belief in the importance of doing a good job, even if that takes more time and costs him more; his love of a challenge, either in responding to changing textile technology or moving to Spain, culminating in the fact that he was tempted by a job in China at the age of 60+; and his desire to continue working, albeit at a reduced pace, when he could have chosen to retire, as his textile design work wound down. Dispositional changes can be seen in relation to his changing positions, such as learning to live in Spain, in his upwardly mobile social class position, and in his recent decision to take things more easily, and to relish working for someone else, rather than continuing with the pressures of being his own boss.

In Western post-enlightenment thought, it is easy to see dispositions as primarily related to agency. This arises in part from the Cartesian split between mind and body, and the linked assumption that human identity is a matter of conscious rational thought. But as Bourdieu makes clear, dispositions are embodied, not just cognitive, and they are rooted in our social positions. Thus, when William ‘chooses’ to take up a job in textile printing and design, this is a result not only of his agency, but also of his masculine and practical working class habitus.

Learning as becoming

In reality, these three dimensions of continuity and change are closely interrelated, and there is an altering balance between continuity and change in the interrelationships between them, over William’s life. Taken together, these dimensions shape our learning and our lives, through the influence of structure and agency. As we have argued elsewhere, this can be helpfully understood if we adopt the metaphor of ‘becoming’ for learning (Hodkinson et al., 2007). That is, learning is a ubiquitous process through life, whereby people’s dispositions and practices are reinforced and/or changed, over time. Often, such becoming does not have a particular end point or objective. In parts of William’s life we can see him striving to learn in order to achieve something. On other occasions, including much of his time at work, the learning is almost incidental. Learning as becoming can be highly significant or equally trivial. We have already drawn attention to some of the more significant learning in William’s life. The more trivial aspects of learning are often not even noticed or talked about – but they happen, none the less. If learning is understood in this way, then the only end point is death. If, as was the intention of this paper, we wish to understand the significance of workplace learning in relation to a person’s learning life, it becomes part of this on-going process of learning as becoming. The nature and significance of the part that workplace learning plays will vary over time in any person’s life, and also from person to person.

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