



Learning journey: Conceptualising “change over time” as a dimension of workplace learning

Adeline Yuen Sze GOH¹

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Abstract

Understanding how individuals learn at work throughout their lives is significant for discussions of lifelong learning in the current era where changes can be unpredictable and frequent, as illustrated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite a corpus of literature on the subject of “learning”, there is little research or theoretical understanding of “change over time” as a dimension of individual learning at work. Increasing emphasis has been put on individuals’ personal development, since they play key mediating roles in organisations’ work practices. This article proposes the concept of the “learning journey” to explore the relational complexity of how individuals learn at different workplace settings across their working lives. In order to illuminate this, the article draws on the learning experiences of two workers with different roles at two points in time across different workplaces. The author argues that individual learning involves a complex interaction of individual positions, identities and agency towards learning. This complexity is relational and interrelated with the workplace learning culture, which is why learning is different for individuals in different workplaces and even for the same person in the same workplace when occupying different roles.

Keywords learning journey · workplace learning · lifelong learning · individual agency · identities · learning cultures

Résumé

Itinéraire d’apprentissage : conceptualisation du « changement au fil du temps » en tant que dimension de l’apprentissage sur le lieu de travail – Comprendre comment les individus apprennent au fil de l’existence en milieu professionnel est important pour nourrir les débats sur l’apprentissage tout au long de la vie à l’époque actuelle

✉ Adeline Yuen Sze GOH
adeline.goh@ubd.edu.bn

¹ Sultan Hassanah Bolkuah Institute of Education, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Gadong, Brunei

où les changements peuvent être imprévisibles et fréquents comme l'illustre la pandémie de COVID-19. Malgré le corpus de littérature existant sur « l'apprentissage », peu de recherches ou de connaissances théoriques portent sur le « changement au fil du temps » en tant que dimension de l'apprentissage individuel sur le lieu de travail. On accorde de plus en plus d'importance au développement personnel des individus étant donné qu'ils assument des rôles de médiation essentiels dans les pratiques professionnelles des entreprises. Cet article présente le concept de « l'itinéraire d'apprentissage » pour examiner la complexité relationnelle de la façon dont les individus apprennent dans différents cadres professionnels tout au long de leur vie active. Pour éclairer ce propos, l'article s'appuie sur l'expérience éducative de deux salariés avec des rôles différents, à deux moments différents, sur des lieux de travail différents. L'autrice affirme que l'apprentissage individuel inclut une interaction complexe entre les points de vue, les identités et l'action personnels en matière d'apprentissage. Cette complexité est d'ordre relationnel et liée à la culture de l'apprentissage sur le lieu de travail, ce qui explique la raison pour laquelle apprendre diffère pour les individus en fonction du lieu de travail, et que même pour une seule et même personne apprendre sur son lieu de travail diffère en fonction des postes qu'elle occupe.

Introduction

In today's precarious global market economy, many countries are under increasing pressure to remain competitive and productive. The impetus to be competitive usually results in changes in work organisation, work structures and the labour market. Many countries promote lifelong workplace learning and encourage innovation as necessary strategies to address these changes (Yorozu 2017). Although a corpus of theoretical accounts of learning exists, there has been limited theorisation or discussion of what lifelong workplace learning might entail, especially in this period of uncertainty and disruption, when career progression is less linear than in earlier times (Akkermans et al. 2020; Arthur et al. 1999).

Drawing on data from a group of in-service vocational teacher trainees enrolled in a one-year training programme run by a local university in Brunei, this article proposes the concept of a “learning journey” to advance our thinking about change over time as a dimension of workplace learning. The article follows a conventional sequence, beginning with a review of the different theoretical perspectives about learning for work to illustrate the hitherto limited emphasis on lifelong workplace learning. This literature review is followed by the research methodology. Two case stories are presented to contextualise the findings, with a discussion considering the interrelationship of individual positions, identity and agency which deepens our understanding of learning throughout working life. The article concludes by underscoring the concept of a “learning journey” to conceptualise the change-over-time dimension of workplace learning as part of individual lifelong learning and the implications of this concept for advancing our thinking on the topic.

Learning for work and lifelong learning

Most countries’ policies and standard practices take an approach to learning for work that focuses on the early stages of a career. For example, initial teacher training and/or teaching practices precede employment as teachers; new doctors need to undergo a period of internship training before entering the profession; and apprentices learn on the job. Once able to perform satisfactorily, they are employed in the job. On a similar note, mature students returning to work are assumed to have completed the necessary training prior to (re-)entering the labour market. This front-loaded model of workplace learning, as the name implies, assumes that all the essential training needed for a lifetime of practice has been completed once the training programme is complete.

There are fundamental issues with the front-loaded model of training for work, which appears poorly aligned with the reality of today’s rapidly changing workplaces. First, proponents of this model tend to assume that initial training for a job will suffice for a lifetime of work practice. Hence, training is usually a one-off event. Second, it is assumed that a given job will last for a substantive part of a person’s life, or that people will stay in one role or job for the whole of their working lives. However, the reality of today’s uncertain economic climate is that changes in work demands, work practices and occupational structures are frequent and unpredictable. This stands in opposition to the front-loaded model, which assumes that the nature of work remains fundamentally unchanged.

Given this gap between models of initial education and the changing realities of work, we need to re-conceptualise workplace learning. Learning for work is no longer a one-off event; rather, it is a lifelong process where the workplace itself is one of the essential sites of learning. This also entails the processes of identity construction and transformation (Van Dellen and Cohen-Scali 2015; Filliettaz 2013, Billett and Somerville 2004). Early studies focused on how workers develop their expertise through their ongoing experiences of work. For example, Chris Argyris and Donald Schön (1974, 1978) write about how workers reflect on their own work experience to adapt to changing circumstances. Schön (1983, 1987) goes on to immortalise the notion of the “reflective practitioner”, focusing on how workers consciously or unconsciously correct their practice in order to develop their expertise. Other writers like Hubert Dreyfus and Stuart Dreyfus (1986) focus on how workers develop their expertise through ongoing experience at work. Hubert Dreyfus (2001) later extended this work to emphasise the salient role of informal experiential learning. Victoria Marsick and Karen Watkins’ (1990) notions of informal learning and incidental learning also contribute to theorising workplace learning. Psychological theories have strongly influenced this body of research.

Following this early thinking, there was a shift of focus from workers themselves to the nature of work practices within the workplace, through which workers learn. This shift is evident in the range of socio-cultural and postmodern theories found in the workplace learning literature. Situated cognition theories (Brown et al. 1989), socio-cultural theories like those of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991), and cultural-historical activity theory (Engeström 1987, 2001) focus on the nature of work practices, which often overlook the individual workers within the workplace. The lack of emphasis on individual workers is a limitation of such theories, which largely

draw upon the participation metaphor (Sfard 1998) whereby the history, agency and dispositions of individual workers are subsumed within the workplace context. Attempting to reintegrate individuals into social participatory processes, writers like Phil Hodkinson and Heather Hodkinson (2004) draw on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), which views individuals as reciprocal parts of the social contexts in which they learn.

From a different perspective, Stephen Billett and Margarita Pavlova (2005) highlight how individual subjectivity and agency can help us understand individual engagement and learning through workplace practices. Billett (2011) argues that some accounts of learning place too much emphasis on social influences. He proposes that individual subjectivity, intentionality and identity are socially shaped over time. These roles contribute to individuals' cognitive experience and subsequently influence their conceptions of what is later experienced. As Lave succinctly puts it:

There are enormous differences in what and how learners come to shape (or be shaped into) their identities with respect to different practices. ... Researchers would have to explore each practice to understand what is being learned, and how (Lave 1996, pp. 161–162).

This claim signals that it is important not just to study workplace practices, but also to understand how individual positions, dispositions and actions influence the way workers learn through participation in various practices throughout their working life – in other words, change over time. Theories such as Lave and Wenger's *communities of practice* and Engeström's *activity theory* struggle to provide a well-developed structure for understanding change over time as a dimension of workplace learning. They focus mostly on the learning itself, which takes either a timeless or a thin temporal slice of individual experience rather than a longitudinal perspective, and seldom explores or captures individual changes.

A few longitudinal studies focus on individual learning over a period of time. Martin Bloomer and Phil Hodkinson explored young learners' dispositions to learning changes over a period of time through engagement in formal education. Based on this study, they developed the concept of "learning careers", defined as "the development of dispositions to learning over time" (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000, p. 590). The concept of "learning careers" continues to be helpful for examining learners' identities and dispositions for learning in various settings (e.g. Gallacher et al. 2002; Crossan et al. 2003; and Ecclestone and Pryor 2003). Whilst this concept may have currency in understanding changes in learners' dispositions, it has been revisited by Hodkinson and his colleagues.

Three broad theoretical perspectives underpin the "learning careers" concept. First, the word "career" is used to refer to "any social strand of any person's course through life" (Goffman 1968, p. 119), where the strand involves learning. This assumption has been challenged by Phil Hodkinson et al. (2007a) on the grounds that learning cannot be separable from other aspects of a person's life, since most learning by an individual has many informal attributes. Second, learning is integral within social practices in any given situation (Lave and Wenger 1991), which contradicts the first perspective. It follows that the concept of "learning careers" does not refer to a sepa-

rate isolated process within the given “location”. Finally, Hodkinson and colleagues draw on Bourdieu’s notion of “dispositions”, which depicts orientations and attitudes towards learning.

In extending the limitations of the concept of “learning careers”, Hodkinson et al. (2007a) propose the use of “learning lives” rather than “learning careers”. The “learning lives” project aimed to understand the complexities of learning over an individual’s life course (Biesta et al. 2011). In agreement with Billett (2001, 2011), Hodkinson et al. (2007a) argue that it is equally important to understand the longitudinal dimension of an individual’s workplace learning within the broader context of their life. They emphasise people’s “learning lives” and see workplace learning as an essential part of these. In other words, they conceptualise workplace learning as part of a person’s wider living and learning throughout their life course. Recognising that living and learning to work run alongside each other as part of lifelong learning (Yorozu 2017), the present article aims to take this approach further, and to conceptualise how people learn in workplaces when roles alter or when people change workplaces. In the ever-changing world we live in today, understanding the dynamics of workplace learning is key in pursuing the United Nations fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4) to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote] lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UN 2015, p. 14).

Methodology

This article draws on data from a completed case study of a group of twelve individuals learning to become vocational teachers in Brunei. The central aim of the original study was to understand how a group of in-service teachers learn prior to and during a one-year initial teacher preparation programme at a local university. The case study is framed within an interpretive qualitative framework which operates on the ontological assumption that “truth” or social reality is socially constructed by individuals (Lincoln and Guba 2000). As an interpretive researcher, I tried to construct a meaningful story from the participants’ point of view and at the same time maximise the benefits of my own experience and insights. My experience both as a student teacher and as a staff member in the same faculty influenced my pre-assumptions about how individuals learn.

I conducted my study at a local university in Brunei between 2007 and 2008. Ethical approval was granted through appropriate channels. All participants were fully informed of the purpose of my research, what the study entailed and the duration of the study, and each of them provided informed consent for their involvement in the study. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured for all participants of the study, including the use of pseudonyms for respondents’ names. Although I was a staff member in the same Faculty of Education at the time of my study, I was not involved in teaching the particular group of student teachers who participated in my study. In order to challenge my pre-assumptions about what I expected to find, I applied Harry Wolcott’s (1994) method of transforming qualitative data and Clark Moustakas’s (1990) heuristic method of analysis, which involves changing the data

into something meaningful through immersion. I will return to this in the later part of the methodology section.

The group of twelve in-service teachers who participated in my case study had been teaching for at least one year in a vocational college prior to joining the programme at a local university.¹ During the programme, they returned to their workplaces for their teaching placements. In order to understand their learning journey, I asked participants to recall both their past teaching experiences in workplaces and their experiences during the teacher training programme. Fieldwork involved two rounds of data collection between 2007 and 2008.

Although the case study was carried out some time ago, my concern here is with questions that are not restricted to specific times, policies, or structural arrangements that might well alter considerably over ten or twenty years. One of the strengths of using a case study approach is to facilitate rich conceptual development where existing theories like the theory of learning cultures are brought up against complex realities. The data about the learning of these trainee teachers can help to generate new thinking and ideas. In this study of trainee teachers' learning, the concept of a "learning journey" emphasises the interrelationship between individuals and learning cultures across their working lives, particularly with reference to the "change-over-time" dimension of their workplace learning. Such change might include the kind of experiences that the individual learners in my study have at each of their workplace settings and their relationship to these workplaces as their roles change.

Data collection

Data collection involved two semi-structured interviews with each participant, one at the beginning and one at the end of the initial teacher preparation programme. The interviews, which were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim, were conducted in English. They lasted on average 60 minutes and consisted of open-ended questions that focused on participants' career decisions, learning in their workplaces and learning on the initial teacher preparation programme. In the first round of interviews, I asked participants about their workplace learning retrospectively. They were also asked to share their learning experiences as trainee teachers at their teaching placements, i.e. their workplaces.

The second round of interviews was derived from and informed by the analysis of the first round. These interviews, which lasted on average 60 minutes, included follow-up questions to take the interview to a deeper level by asking for more detail (Rossman and Rallis 2003), and also included questions that enabled participants to share their learning experiences from the programme. Due to the limited time frame and resources, I drew my case study data from trainee teachers' interview data alone, which could be seen as a limitation. However, given the nature of my data and how they were collected, the participants' perspectives were central to how I made sense of the specific learning cultures of their workplaces and their different roles,

¹ The method I used to recruit participants was based on practical and pragmatic guidelines such as being accessible; willing to be interviewed during the time allocated to them and representing different vocational teaching areas.

which subsequently influenced my analysis of the data. Moreover, I complemented my interview data with key documentation about the teacher training preparation programme. Collecting and analysing this material to provide an understanding of the context also subsequently confirmed my knowledge of the training of vocational teachers.

Data analysis

The process of data collection and data analysis was cyclical. Each stage of data analysis helped to inform the subsequent data collection, which focused on deepening understanding and examining in-depth experiences of the trainee teachers at their workplaces. The analysis of the data involved two stages. The first stage was carried out during the first round of interviews. I approached my interview data with reference to the three-stage process of *description*, *analysis* and *interpretation* to transform qualitative data (Wolcott 1994). The process of description involved drawing up individual case stories to obtain an in-depth understanding of each participant’s career decisions and learning in the workplace. I then subjected these stories to re-analysis in the light of data obtained from the second interview.

I also used Moustakas’ (1990) “heuristic analysis” to make sense of the data through immersion, then standing back and allowing the subconscious to work. Moustakas’ heuristic method provided a framework for guidance and clarification which helped to challenge my pre-assumptions from my own experiences. Sandy Sela-Smith (2002) acknowledges that this makes Moustakas’ method a valuable tool in the exploration of subjective human experience, especially the experiences of student teachers when they move from one context to another. My own personal experience as a student teacher and a staff member on the teacher training programme acted as a catalyst for inquiry. As Moustakas (1990) makes clear, the qualities of tacit knowing (Polanyi 1983) and intuition are crucial components of heuristic inquiry. Drawing on Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln’s (1989) version of the “hermeneutic circle”, analysis of the data involved moving between the parts and the whole. Neither of these could be understood without reference to the other, as “meanings c[an] only be understood in relation to a larger whole” (Hollway and Jefferson 2000).

Through immersion in the first and second interview transcripts, I wrote up case studies of individual student-teachers’ learning for each participant using a largely descriptive process incorporating significant sections of the original interview data to represent the individual’s own words. The main reason for writing up individual case studies for each participant was not just to produce a story for that individual, but also to understand how they learned to become a vocational teacher through engaging in different learning contexts across their career journey. In the second stage of analysis, I compared the twelve case studies in terms of issues, patterns, commonalities and differences, which is part of Moustakas’ (1990) heuristic research. The revealed patterns were examined, and themes began to emerge through a rigorous inductive and iterative process. The procedure also involved contextualising the data within a broader theoretical framework in the same research field. Here, the theory of learning cultures based on Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptual tools of cultural and other forms of

“capital” (Bourdieu 1986) provided an overarching framework and a set of “thinking tools” to link the case studies with broader issues.

Revisiting two participants’ learning journeys

In this article, I focus on two individuals, Mary and Phillip, to explore their learning at their workplaces. Mary and Phillip were both training to become vocational teachers, but were, at the time of my study, at different stages of their learning journey, with different roles. These stages include their workplace learning as full-time teachers before enrolling in their teacher training programme (i.e. during their first few years of teaching) and their learning as in-service trainee teachers in their workplaces.

I have chosen Mary’s and Phillip’s stories for a specific reason. Research has shown that worker position, status, and the nature of work can influence individual learning and career development (Billett 2001; Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2004). This article aims to explore these differences and the individuals’ dispositions towards learning across the different learning cultures in which they participated. My findings show that the interrelationships between positions, identity and agency play a significant role in influencing workplace learning at different stages of becoming a vocational teacher. At the time of my study, Mary and Phillip were both in-service teachers in the early stages of their career, with different career trajectories. Although both had enrolled in the same teacher training programme, their approaches to learning differed. I argue that this difference is due to the interrelationship between individual positions and dispositions to learning and workplace learning cultures.

The following stories are constructed based on the interview data alone. These constructed stories are mine. One might argue that there are always different versions of personal stories that can be constructed (Stronach and MacLure 1997). For some researchers of a realist bent (Feuer et al. 2002), this might call into question the validity of my findings. My response to such critics is that, with qualitative data like mine, researchers do their best to tell a version of the truth as honestly as possible, and there is no doubt that some uncertainties will remain. Nevertheless, the credibility of the research is strengthened if other researchers working in a similar setting end up with similar stories. The credibility of the research then becomes a matter of coherence, as John Smith argues succinctly:

For interpretive inquiry, the basis of truth or trustworthiness is social agreement; what is judged true or trustworthy is what we can agree, conditioned by time and place, is true or trustworthy (Smith 1984, p. 386).

Moreover, the findings from this study may also “ring true” in other settings. Readers can judge for themselves whether the analysis presented sounds convincing based on what they know of similar settings. In addition, I have established rigour in my research findings through a coherent methodology, i.e. by using case studies within an interpretive framework. Thus, the rationale for every stage of the methodology is made clear.

The interrelationship between individual positions, identity and agency in workplace learning

In order to contextualise the findings in this section, I will first provide case descriptions of Mary and Phillip to give some sense of “change over time” as a dimension of workplace learning as they change roles at their workplaces. Following this, I use the concepts of *position*, *identity* and *agency* that underpin the proposed “learning journey” to analyse and discuss these case descriptions.

Learning as a new teacher

Mary, a Malay woman, had been employed as a full-time tutor at nursing college. Prior to becoming a nurse tutor, she undertook training in the same nursing college before going overseas to further her studies. Upon graduation, she joined the staff of the college. Initially, she was appointed as a coordinator, a role which she felt she had been appointed to prematurely. Her colleagues, who were also her teachers at that time, had high expectations of her. Because she had a higher degree qualification, they appointed her as a coordinator straight away:

“Their high expectations have thrown me off the board ... I wanted them to know that I have limited teaching experience ... I didn’t think that I gave an impression that I knew everything, but they thought that being a postgraduate student, I should be knowledgeable. Some colleagues challenged me that way which in a way intimidated me. They would put up their wall ...”

Mary had expected to be allocated a mentor who could guide her when she first joined the teaching staff, but she was not given one. She felt lost as she was provided neither with a curriculum nor a formal induction in how to deliver it. Despite this lack of support, she managed to develop her teaching skills through trial and error and chose to teach modules where she felt she could contribute. She also chose to take the initiative to learn from her colleagues:

“I made my *initiative* to come to some of the colleagues which I considered as a good teacher, to observe how they teach the subjects which I will be teaching. I sat in a few of their classes and I even co-teach with these teachers.” [emphasis added]

She also co-taught with another colleague whom she had the chance to observe before being given some lessons to teach herself. She remembered her first lesson, where she did not know how to begin or which teaching approach to use. However, she was able to draw on her past observations of her colleague, which helped her to continue with the teaching. In addition, she did have the support of a buddy system which consisted of junior tutors who had already been through the teacher training programme. As well as sharing resources, this buddy system allowed them to conduct “cross-teaching”, a new approach whereby all of them collaborated to deliver the curriculum across different levels, instead of just one level of any particular programme.

As a nurse tutor, Mary also had to teach in a clinical setting. She felt she lacked the clinical experience to be able to demonstrate practical knowledge of nursing, as she had not worked as a nurse:

“... my undergraduate degree has prepared me with a lot of practical experience but it is different when you are a nurse in the hospital. I am groomed strongly in theory, but theory is useless if you don't know the practical side of it, which made me feel deficient.”

Mary therefore did not have a smooth transition into her first year of teaching. Instead, she had to be proactive in building social relationships with her colleagues and finding learning opportunities, since the college itself gave her limited support.

In contrast to Mary's story, Phillip's learning trajectory to becoming a vocational teacher went comparatively smoothly. Phillip, a middle-aged Chinese man, decided to go into teaching after working for several years as an engineer abroad. He developed an interest in teaching after mentoring some work-attachment (trainee) students at his engineering workplace. He was eager to join the teacher training programme to equip himself with the appropriate pedagogical skills. When he first joined his college, he saw himself as an engineer and a teacher:

“I see myself as an engineer and a teacher because I think it has to be together. For me you cannot be a good engineering lecturer unless you are also a good engineer in terms of your knowledge ... keeping update with what is going in the industry, for example, and know what is happening in the industry is important ...”

Due to his previous role as an engineer, Phillip would teach his students in the same way that he made presentations as an engineer to his clients. Unlike Mary, Phillip was allocated an unofficial mentor who helped him transition into his workplace. Phillip's mentor was helpful and supported Phillip by sharing teaching resources with him. They would discuss different issues, and the mentor would challenge Phillip with difficult tutorial questions. Phillip was also given opportunities to be involved in developing the curriculum. He therefore had a chance to understand the content of each of the programmes.

Learning as a trainee teacher

During her enrolment in the teacher training programme, Mary found it useful to return to her workplace for her teaching placement every Monday to try out different teaching methods that she had learnt in the programme. Phillip was less keen to try out the methods he had learnt in the programme at his placements. Having taught in his college for the past three years, Phillip had already gained knowledge of the teaching approaches which were most useful to teaching his subject, and he was familiar with the type and level of his students. When introduced to new methods of teaching and learning, he therefore decided to continue what he had been doing before entering the programme:

“... I can see the point of using these methods, but I am not so sure whether I want to implement it all as much as [name of university lecturer] would like in my lectures ... I will still use my own way of structuring my lesson and will do one for the university.”

Mary found it challenging to switch her role to that of trainee teacher at her workplace every Monday. She had to adjust to her role as a learner and learn to negotiate with her mentor, who was also the headmaster of her college, to observe her teaching. Her colleagues continued to see her as their full-time colleague rather than as someone who still needed time to acquire the full range of skills a teacher possesses. Mary therefore had to learn to be proactive in protecting her role as a learner when on her teacher training programme:

“Most of them view me as a professional colleague ... They wanted to give me a lot of hours to teach ... I also need to be very *assertive* ... or else I would end up 100 hours of teaching and top up with what I have to do here [university].”
[emphasis added]

Like Mary, Phillip also continued to be seen by his colleagues as their full-time colleague. Unlike Mary, however, he also saw himself as a full-time teacher and continued to perform his role when given the usual administrative duties:

“... we have to supervise projects as well ... and for this semester, I have to take on more teaching workload ... I am also the timetable coordinator for the department ...”

Phillip had had the same mentor when he first entered teaching. However, he did not entirely follow his mentor’s advice:

“... he is helpful when he has the time. If I ask anything, he will help. He gives a lot of advice, maybe some of it I will use it. Although he has more experience than me, I still disagree with certain things he said ... he has got his own points and views about certain things. For example, for assessments, he would do certain things certain ways, I would say ... there is another way of doing it ... I find I don’t do everything he does, but I find his advice and guidance very helpful.”

“Learning cultures” and “dispositions”

Mary’s and Phillip’s stories illustrate how they learn at their workplaces with different roles. There is an extensive body of literature which shows how learning is situated. Lave and Wenger suggest that:

learning is not merely situated in practice – as if it were some independently reifiable process that just happened to be located somewhere; learning is an inte-

gral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world (Lave and Wenger 1991, p. 35).

Phil Hodkinson et al. (2007b) prefer to understand the social practices through which people learn as “learning cultures”. Therefore, within any workplace, a learning culture exists. It follows that participation in different learning cultures will influence individuals’ lives differently (Biesta et al. 2011). What is equally important is the *position* of individuals in these workplace learning cultures, as these influence the way they perceive their work practices. Put another way, individuals have subjective perceptions called *dispositions* which are located within their objective positions. Dispositions are more than schemata of perceptions or beliefs. Rather, these perceptions derive from and are part of the whole person. Bourdieu uses the term “habitus” to capture all this, defined as a battery of dispositions accumulated through ongoing life experiences that are durable and transposable (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Individual positions influence learning in many ways. For example, social positions can be historical and geographical, or situated within particular learning cultures (see Hodkinson et al. 2008).

When Mary first joined her teaching job, she was in a better position than other newcomers like Phillip since she had herself once been a student of this college, i.e. her new workplace. She knew many of the lecturers, and was able to draw on her own student experiences to inform her teaching. In Bourdieu’s terms, she had both cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1986). Cultural capital is defined as the amount of knowledge relative to the learning culture. It is deemed valuable, since it usually determines whether a person will succeed (ibid.). Social capital is an individual’s network of relations with other people (ibid.).

Legitimate peripheral participation vs. being thrown in at the deep end

As a newcomer, Mary would normally be positioned at the periphery of the workplace community of practice and gradually learn the ropes before being given full responsibility for a task. Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to this as “legitimate peripheral participation”. Instead, she was thrown in at the deep end, like the teachers in Colin Lacey’s (1977) study. She was given limited support and no mentor, yet was expected to take on full responsibility. Her accrued cultural capital in terms of her subject knowledge and social capital from her student years did not help her to learn as a newcomer. They may even have created a barrier to her learning opportunities. Elsewhere (Goh and Zukas 2016) a co-author and myself have reported similar findings, which contradict Bourdieu, who states that having cultural capital makes one likely to succeed in the relevant field (Bourdieu 1986). We argue that cultural capital is not the only aspect that should be considered when trying to understand how individuals learn in a learning context (see also Goh 2014). Mary’s story clearly shows the opposite. In hindsight, it is worth noting that Lave and Wenger (1991) did not address the issue of newcomers having to take on full responsibility without being allowed to experience the process of legitimate peripheral participation. Mary’s story shows that newcomers are not always necessarily positioned at the periphery of a community of practice.

It is similarly worth noting that Hodkinson et al. (2007b) did not explicitly discuss how individuals manage the transition from newcomer to full member in such a short timescale within a learning culture. The lack of time for this transition requires individuals to adapt quickly to the new role and the level of responsibility that comes with it. Mary’s account of her learning is similar to what Miriam Zukas and Sue Kilminster (2012) call the “critical intensive learning period”. This occurs when individuals are not treated as newcomers when transitioning to new areas of work and responsibilities, but are instead “thrown in at the deep end” and expected to be experts and act with full responsibility. Similarly, Hodkinson and Hodkinson’s research study (2003, 2004) showed that when an experienced teacher changed to a new job, they were expected to be an expert from the outset. Unlike Mary, Phillip, who was positioned at the periphery and who lacked cultural and social capital in relation to his workplace, had a smooth transition into becoming a teacher with the support of his mentor.

Identity and changing roles

Due to Mary’s ambiguous position in relation to her workplace, she had a difficult transition period from learning as a new teacher to learning as a trainee teacher compared to Phillip. Within the literature, there is limited understanding of how the change of positions in relation to the workplace influences individuals’ learning. What emerges strongly from these two stories is that change over time through learning within the workplace is influenced by the change of roles from teacher to trainee teacher. Subsequently, the extent of this influence on individuals’ dispositions to learn depends on the tension between their “self-identity” (how they see themselves in relation to the situation) and how they exercise their agency when colleagues continue to see them as full-time teachers. Mary’s story reveals a marked tension between her “self-identity” and how she was viewed by her colleagues, which compelled her to exercise her agency to protect her learner status.

Identity can also be defined as a person’s disposition about themselves (Biesta et al. 2011). Defining it in this way allows us to think of identity as more than a cognitive concept, since most of the time we cannot articulate clearly who we are, and even if we are and do, much is left out. That is, our accumulated dispositions add up to more than how we think of ourselves. At the same time, how we see ourselves underpins many of our dispositions towards life.

The stories of Mary and Phillip illustrate the influence of early-career vocational teachers’ dual identities (Fejes and Köpsén 2014) on their learning journey. Phillip saw himself as an engineer as well as a teacher. He recognised the need to learn to teach whilst still keeping his vocational skills up to date with developments in the industry. Similarly, Mary stressed the importance of equipping herself with clinical skills, since these reflected upon her credibility as a nurse tutor. Mary saw herself as a nurse tutor much of the time, but she never explicitly talked about how her clinical nursing knowledge influenced her teaching. Mary talked on several occasions about teaching her students the importance of emotional care and the subtleties of caring for older patients. This illustrates the overlap between an individual’s identity and the roles they are called on to play. How individuals see themselves is linked to their roles in the workplace. The stories in this article show that it is important to

understand both how newcomers view themselves *and* the expectations placed on them by other people in their role as new workers in the workplace, which tends to be overlooked in the literature.

Coping strategies

Mary and Phillip were both able to shape their responses to the situations they encountered in their workplaces in different ways. They responded differently based on the relationship between how they saw their own roles in their workplaces and how others saw them. Mary comes across as a very strong-willed person. She struggled to maintain her role due to the tensions between her identity and her position within the learning culture. As discussed earlier on, tensions arose when she saw herself as a new teacher, but her colleagues viewed her as an expert. Her colleagues had high expectations of her capability and therefore gave her minimal support in learning to teach. She was thus obliged to construct learning relationships (Goh 2013) with her “buddies” which allowed her to learn to teach by “cross-teaching” with them. Tensions also arose when Mary saw herself as a trainee teacher, but her colleagues viewed her as a full-time teacher. She had to be proactive in keeping her learner status in order to be able to learn in her workplace. These tensions were difficult to reconcile. They resulted in Mary having to exercise her agency in constructing or reshaping her work role and identity.

In Phillip’s story, there are several examples of tensions between his identity and his position when he returned to his workplace as a trainee teacher. Unlike Mary, Phillip saw himself as a teacher and was viewed as such by his colleagues, who gave him administrative tasks. He managed his tensions differently to Mary by being proactive in taking up these tasks. His actions and dispositions can be described as “strategic compliance” in satisfying the needs of his workplace. Phillip also exercised his agency when writing two sets of lesson plans: one to satisfy the university programme’s requirements and another reflecting the way he had been teaching prior to enrolling on the programme. Tensions arose when there was disagreement between Phillip and his mentor regarding teaching methods. In these instances Phillip was seen to be taking control of his learning.

Agency

As Mary and Phillip transitioned to a different level of work and responsibility involving a change of roles over time, they were required to practise some degree of agency in “negotiating their identity positions” (Eteläpelto et al. 2013, 2014; Vähäsantanen and Eteläpelto 2009, 2011; Goh 2013) in order to change work practices. This requirement creates differences in individuals’ dispositions to learning in their respective workplaces even among people with the same status of trainee teacher. Put simply, the difference in individuals’ learning results from the interrelationship between three concepts: *position*, *identity* and *agency*. Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische (1998, p. 971) argue that agency is the “capacity of actors to critically shape their own responsiveness to problematic situations”. Drawing on this idea, Gert Biesta and Michael Tedder see agency as “the ability to exert control over

and give direction to one’s life” (Biesta and Tedder 2007, p. 135). Biesta et al. (2011) argue that agency is the individual’s ability to change parts of their dispositions and/or their positions. The stories of Mary and Phillip clearly show that the variation in the exercise of agency depends on an individual’s identities, professional competence and relations to other professionals in the workplace (Vähäsantanen et al. 2009; Kersh 2015). In circumstances like those of Mary and Phillip where work roles and identity are not clearly defined for other workers, individuals need to exercise agency to establish their own professional identities (Eteläpelto et al. 2013). An individual’s agentic actions are akin to striving for distinction in order to survive and be successful (Bourdieu 1984).

The “learning journey”: the interrelationship between individuals and workplace learning cultures

The change-over-time dimension of workplace learning is seen when individuals change workplaces or change their roles within the same workplace over a period of time, which usually results in a change of work practices. Mary’s and Phillip’s stories illustrate that the interrelationship between individual positions, agency and identity is paramount to understanding an individual’s lifelong workplace learning. When Mary and Phillip changed roles within their workplaces, their positions changed in relation to their workplaces’ learning cultures. To cope with this, they were then required to exercise their agency which was largely tied to their identities. These findings concur with the argument of Anneli Eteläpelto et al. (2013) that in order to construct meaningful life courses we should focus on how individuals negotiate agency in work and life. To develop a robust conceptualisation of lifelong workplace learning, we need to explore the learning cultures of the different workplaces in which individuals participate. Learning can only be understood through the interrelationship of the learning cultures of workplaces and individuals.

At all levels, there is a complex interaction between individual dispositions and identity on the one hand, and individual positions in a range of workplaces on the other, each with its own learning culture. When the roles of Mary and Phillip changed from teacher to trainee teacher, the learning cultures within their workplaces also shifted. Their stories illustrate the importance of individual positions and dispositions in relation to practices within the workplace (Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2004; Goh 2021). This study also reconfirms Hodkinson’s concepts of “learning careers” and “learning lives”, since it shows that individuals’ dispositions to learning can develop and change over time through interaction with different learning cultures across the lifespan. Simultaneously, learning cultures within the workplace can change over time, which often results in either continuity or changes in practices.

Mary’s and Phillip’s actions and dispositions to learning exist in relation to many other factors which influence the learning cultures of their workplaces. Their learning was also dependent on and shaped by *workplace affordances*, which are constituted by workplace hierarchies, contestation and personal relations (Billett 2001). On the other hand, the learning opportunities that an individual can see in their workplace are limited by the position they occupy and the horizons that are visible from that

position. Hodkinson et al. prefer to describe this as an individual's "horizon of learning". That is,

... in any situation there are opportunities to learn. What those opportunities are, and the ways in which the process of learning takes place, depends on the nature of the learning culture and of the position, habitus and capitals of the individuals, in interaction with each other in their horizons for learning, as part of a field of relationships (Hodkinson et al. 2008, p. 41).

This process, a kind of "learning to become", also depends on the individual's receptiveness and the extent to which s/he is able to recognise the learning support available from others, in order to maintain individual engagement with the activities for continuing development. When tensions surfaced, Mary was able to leverage her buddy system to learn to teach. Anne Edwards (2015) calls this "relational agency", referring to individuals' capacity to be receptive and engage with others as resources.

Learning as becoming

Mary's and Phillip's learning to "become" involved a change in roles within the same workplace. They needed to (re)negotiate their identities in different circumstances, which depended partly on how their colleagues saw them and partly on how they themselves saw their changing roles. Lesley Scanlon (2011) argues that the process of "becoming" involves individuals rehearsing their "possible or provisional selves" (Ibarra 1999). In line with other scholars (Billett 2011; Harteis and Goller 2014; Vähäsantanen et al. 2017), the stories of Mary and Phillip highlight that individual agency is crucial in the formation of individuals' learning and the development of professional identities where learning and practice are relational (Billett 2010).

Given the complexity of the interrelationship between individuals and their context, individuals' lifelong workplace learning can be viewed as a journey, which considers individuals' learning as becoming through participating in different learning cultures longitudinally throughout the entire length of their life. Mary and Phillip continued to learn throughout their working life, and thus continued to "become". This process of "learning to become" can be one of change or of continuity, depending on the individual's changing roles and positions. Individuals are always "becoming" through continuous learning experiences which become a part of them (Jarvis 2007), and which either reinforce or change their dispositions. This study shows that individuals learn to become through exercising their agency in different ways, either changing or reinforcing their practices in the workplace. This in turn illustrates that individuals can only learn to become through participating in the practices within their learning cultures.

Conclusion

The concept of a "learning journey" is useful in researching individuals' change over time as a dimension of workplace learning, which involves either a change of

workplaces or a change of role within the workplace. A learning journey highlights the significance of the interrelationship between individual dispositions and ever-changing learning contexts (in this case, Mary’s and Phillip’s different workplaces). The learning journey considers the complex interrelationships between individual agency, positions and identity, which vary between individuals, at different times and in different situations. This highlights the need for lifelong learning policies to consider individual responsibility for learning and workplace affordances (Billett 2001), while also taking account of the necessity of informal learning (Marsick and Watkins 1990).

The concept of a “learning journey” addresses the limitations of existing workplace learning theories which overlook the perspectives of either the individual learner or the workplaces. It does this by signifying the importance of individual learners and their habitus (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) where learning is embodied, rather than simplistically trying to understand learning by looking only at the work practices within a work organisation. The concept of a “learning journey” is timely since it helps us to reconsider change over time as a dimension of workplace learning, in ways which look beyond the traditional linear career progression in this unpredictable postmodern era. It brings a fresh perspective on how individual lifelong workplace learning can be supported through unprecedented and disruptive events such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Adeline Yuen Sze GOH is a Senior Assistant Professor at the Sultan Hassanali Bolkuah Institute of Education, Universiti Brunei Darussalam. She completed her PhD at the Institute of Lifelong Learning, University of Leeds, UK, and was previously appointed as an honorary research fellow at Birkbeck, University of London. Her background as an adult educator has entailed engagement with professionals in education, healthcare and other professional sectors. Her research interests include workplace learning, adult education, teacher education, professional learning and lifelong learning.