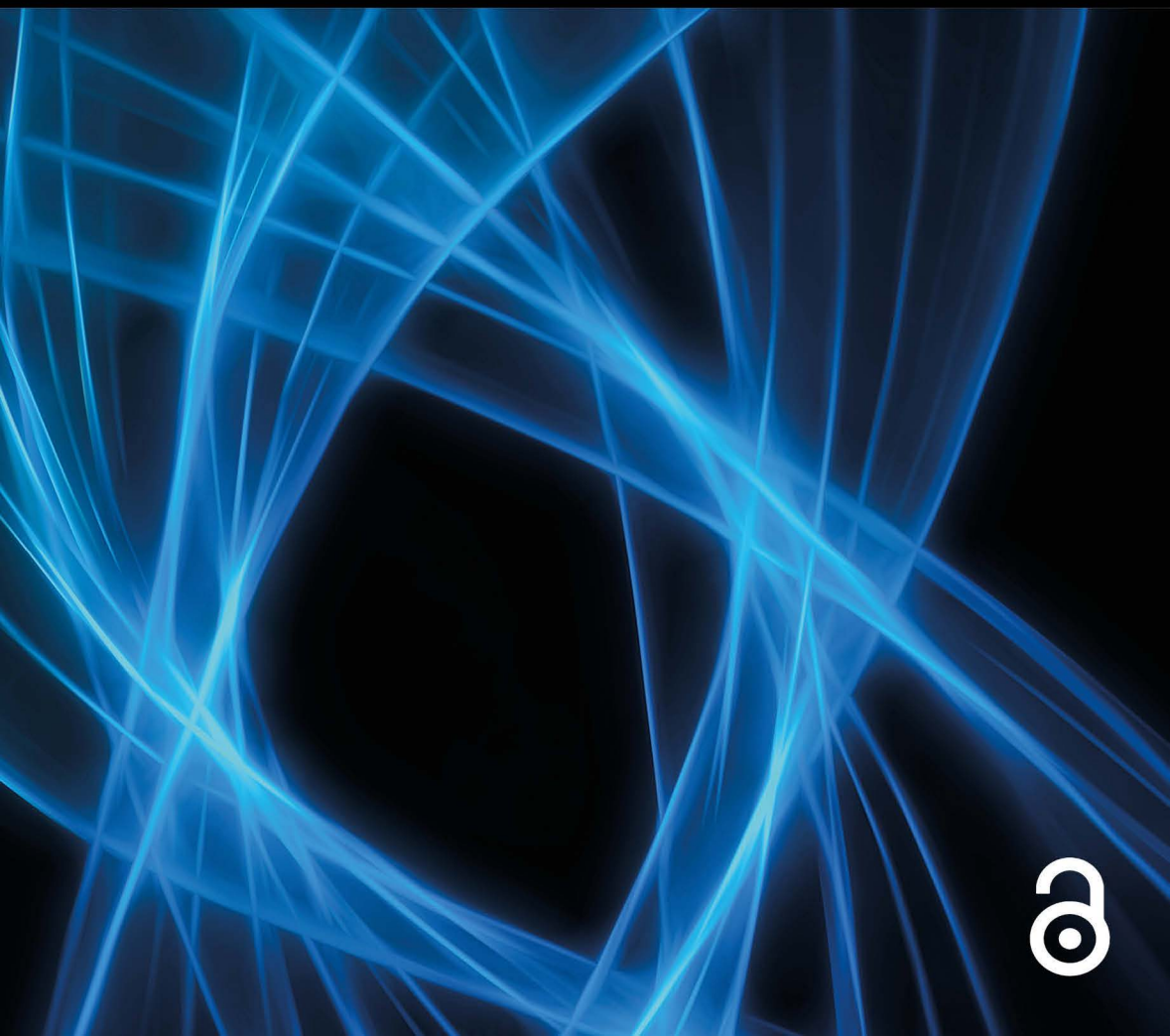


Adult Education in Changing Times

Learning at the Nexus of Life, Work, and Transitions

Edited by Michael Bernhard, Stephen Billett, Christiane Hof,
Katrin Kraus, Victoria J. Marsick, and Peter H. Sawchuk



ADULT EDUCATION IN CHANGING TIMES

This insightful book explores adult learning at the intersection of a rapidly changing world of work and society, and the personal, lived experiences of individuals navigating these shifts. It illuminates the social dimensions of adult learning in the contemporary era, highlighting the challenges and opportunities of being able to thrive in times of change.

Each carefully curated chapter presents theoretical insights, empirical findings, and diverse perspectives on adult development across the life course, drawing from historical, cultural, and social contexts to enrich the discourse. Throughout, the authors explore the concept of “liquid modernity” as a lens to understand the complexities of learning and work, presenting innovative frameworks to rethink and redefine these interconnected dynamics. They challenge traditional assumptions about lifelong education and invite readers to see learning differently than it was understood in more predictable times. By focusing on the dynamic interplay between social contexts, life events, and lived experiences, the book provides a nuanced understanding of adult learning as a process shaped by the evolving demands of work and society.

This book is an essential resource for researchers, educators, and policymakers, as well as anyone who supports adult learners. Offering profound insights into the ways adults navigate learning, work, and life transitions, it outlines a way to allow adults to flourish in an ever-changing world.

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PREFACE

This volume originated in extensive discussions across continents and institutions that began long before the first chapter was written. The conversations were driven by a shared interest in how adults learn outside formal educational settings and a search for theoretical concepts relevant to the significant societal changes currently occurring.

The initial impetus for this book was a conference hosted by our department of Adult Education and Lifelong Learning at the Goethe University in Frankfurt in late 2023. There, we brought together a group of internationally established and emerging researchers to discuss adult learning outside educational institutions with a focus on the nexus and interrelations of life course, work, and transitions. We wanted to understand adult learning better by focusing on the influence of the life course – including life course transitions and biographical experience – and the demands, changing nature, and evolving role of work in people's lives. Our discussions were guided by questions of how adult learning beyond institutions of further and continuing education might be conceptualised; how the social context, framing, and embeddedness of learning can be theorised; and how the changing demands and nature of work can be systematised, researched, and put in relation to learning.

This book represents an extension of that evolving conversation. It brings together researchers from diverse theoretical, empirical, and geographical backgrounds, united by a dedication to researching learning and work as key, complex aspects of life, especially during transitions, rather than seeing learning as a simple reaction to teaching. The volume is intended to help us to rethink relationships among those who support adult learning across various domains in today's highly networked work and learning environment: policy makers whose decisions affect resources and constraints; educators who need to reach beyond classrooms to other

locales of adult learning; managers who shape working and learning environments; mentors who help people to find their personal ways and to make sense of what is happening around them; and not least the adults as learners themselves.

It has been a great privilege to have Stephen Billett, Katrin Kraus, Victoria J. Marsick, and Peter H. Sawchuk as co-editors, authors, and discussion partners. Their work continues to shape the field, and their perspectives have given depth to this book and enriched our ongoing dialogue.

Christiane Hof and Michael Bernhard
Frankfurt am Main, Germany

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We are grateful to our colleagues who have taken part in this journey and dedicated their time and energy to write, submit, revise, and refine the chapters in this book. We would also like to thank our copy editor, Kathleen Weekley, who provided valuable feedback and suggestions for edits to each chapter.

Last but definitely not least, we gratefully acknowledge the efforts and contributions of the many colleagues, predecessors, and all the less visible adult educators whose voices have added to the richness of our collective thinking on this topic of adult learning at the nexus of life, work, and transitions.

PART I

Adult Learning at the Nexus of Life, Work, and Transitions



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1

SEEING LEARNING DIFFERENTLY

An Introduction

*Christiane Hof, Victoria J. Marsick,
and Peter H. Sawchuk*

This book examines adult learning at the nexus of the life course, work, and transitions in today's rapidly changing world. Individuals are constantly learning as they take up challenges and pursue opportunities, learning assumes different shapes and opportunity spaces, and individual learning is always situated in and interactive with the social context in its various configurations. The contributors to this book share their research and perspectives that broaden our understanding of adult learning in social contexts. They do so using a variety of disciplinary, social, geo-political, economic, and cultural lenses.

Societal Transformations as Challenges for Adult Learning

The world we live in is characterised by myriad challenges and changes that affect all areas of our lives. At the macro level, we observe climate change and its consequences, multiplying armed conflicts and political turmoil in many parts of the world, economic and political transformations, global migration flows, and an increase in the differences between rich and poor within and between countries. Technological developments and the consequences of digitalisation go hand in hand with a change in the forms of production, labour markets, and the organisation of work. A 2025 McKinsey & Company report by its Research and Innovation Learning Lab, *Development in the Future of Work*, for example, notes that due to “constant disruption . . . [r]oles, systems, and scopes of influence that once seemed defined or distinct . . . are now interdependent, overlapping, and inextricably linked. To succeed in this new paradigm, the solutions too must be interdependent.” McKinsey advocates that organisations and individuals “learn to bounce forward, to reimagine how work gets done, how people learn and develop, and how organisations function as resilient, adaptive systems” (2025, p. 1). At the same

time, the development of generative AI and machine learning is revolutionising life and work. What are the challenges associated with these processes? Which theoretical approaches are helpful in dealing with them? How can adult educators innovate approaches to individual lifelong learning that engage with and thrive in these emergent realities?

At the meso level – where interactions between people and their institutions occur – some speak of an erosion of democracy and identify increasing racism and the devaluation of those who think differently. This process also impacts the micro level and, therefore, how people organise and experience their everyday lives. Economic and political problems and technological and cultural challenges lead to upheaval and psychological disturbances at the personal level. Uncertainty can be the impetus, initiating for learning processes (Hof & Bernhard, 2025). It reveals the relevance of acquiring new knowledge and skills and transforming our perspectives on ourselves and the world. Besides acquiring new declarative knowledge and perspectives, learning implies transforming actions and related procedural knowledge.

Against the backdrop of these transformation processes, adult education researchers inquire into how changing global socio-economic conditions, digital and neuroscientific discoveries, as well as post-COVID organisational “resets” continue to shape what adults, communities, organisations, and societies learn. Simultaneously, these researchers continue to develop their interest in *learning processes*, that is, how this learning unfolds. Researchers not only talk about learning goals, outcomes, and better teaching methods but also seek to look deeper into the learning process and learners’ perspectives. As well as the transformation of society and its needs, individual learners too are considered a relevant starting point for educational research. Why and what are people learning? How do they interact with their environment? How do they integrate new knowledge and skills into their prior knowledge? How do they change mindsets? How do they actively innovate solutions to formerly unimaginable challenges?

A rapidly changing world surfaces many questions, provoking concerns about established meanings, terminologies, interests, and perspectives across languages and cultures. This is no less the case among the international adult education research communities (see the cross-cultural review of key learning concepts by Kraus, Sawchuk, and Billett in this volume), and it has implications for adult education practices and the international research community that must reflect on the terms and concepts used to talk about adult education.

Against this backdrop, the contributors discuss the challenges of the described transformations and relate them to the situated contextual learning with which adults engage and experiment as they confront new (and old) opportunities, challenges, and workarounds in a changing landscape of work and living. Among the situated contexts that they investigate are immigrants adjusting to radically different life circumstances, care-giving nurses examining their everyday practices, career changers seeking further education, people upskilling in the face of digital

disruption, marginalised populations seeking employment training, and professionals learning to confront new challenges and work practices.

This book intends to contribute answers to the many questions raised by such conditions. And the answers are based on the following premises:

- Adult learning takes place both inside and outside formal educational settings.
- Research into learning must respect individual biographies and life course transitions.
- Connecting individual and social, situated, and political dimensions of learning is important.
- Work-related learning is a particularly salient form of learning over the life course.
- The search for theoretical lenses seeks to explain the relationships of individuals and social contexts and practices, and to develop a rich understanding of different aspects of the individuals' social situatedness.

Adult learning inside and outside formal educational settings

Since the 1960s, various lifelong education and learning discourses have explored the connections between changing societies and learning. But the demand for lifelong learning has mainly been understood as learning in formal or non-formal settings. However, changes to work and society and to individuals' biographical practices and expectations have led to an increasing recognition of informal, incidental, and self-directed learning methods, often outside of formal education curricula. Consequently, learning needs to be seen differently, our focus having shifted from seeing it simply as education programmes and teaching to understanding it as embedded in social practices and outside as well as inside education institutions. In other words, we must recognise the nexus of different spheres in which learning is embedded.

We have come to understand that adults learn in both dedicated education institutions and other contexts such as work, community, and volunteer associations, within families and via the World Wide Web. Moreover, we recognise that the learning that arises from these different experiences is often decentred, socially situated, and undertaken by individuals. The learning assumes different shapes and occurs in specific configurations and opportunity spaces.

Once we acknowledge that adults learn both inside and outside formal education institutions, new questions arise:

- How can we theorise the learning of adults in relation to and beyond teaching?
- How can we better understand – and support – the nexus of life course transitions, biographical situations, societal changes, and learning affordances?
- How are changes in the field of work related to changes in the ways of learning within and beyond work?

From a perspective that does not think of adult education solely in terms of organised learning spaces, we also must consider how the described societal transformations change people's lives. We must look at the changes in life courses and individual biographies to see that the relationships between work, learning, and the life course are fundamentally changing, especially with increasing digitalisation, migration, and complexity.

Adult Learning as Situated in Everyday Life

Leaving behind the limitations of a strict focus on the organised adult education system requires recognising that it is also the individual that learns. On the one hand, the individual learner is positioned at a certain point in the life course; they have had certain biographical experiences and developed a personal set of habits, ideas, and worldviews as well as skills and knowledge. On the other hand, this learner lives in a social world with a specific arrangement of material resources, rules, and conventions, within which a wide range of possible actions may be taken. In other words, we must remember that learning is embedded in everyday life and subject to a host of opportunities and interests, limits and pressures. Following this argument, in this book we also look at the perspectives of individuals who live and learn in challenging times and shape their lives through learning – without forgetting the reciprocal relationship of the learner to their individuality and sociality.

Following Dewey (1938) and his pragmatist perspective on learning, we tend to consider experience as central to the learning process. Experience in this sense entails the idea that learning is embedded in concrete situations with concrete materialities, human beings, expectations, restrictions, and cultures. Experience of these situations offers concrete opportunities for learning. At the same time, specific situations can confine or restrict learning possibilities. Kemmis et al. (2014), for example, point to practice arrangements that influence learning (see Bernhard in this volume). However, looking deeper, it seems crucial also to understand experience as a relationship between passive suffering and active interpretation of the situation. We note that Dewey's philosophical approach has been applied by empirical researchers who follow the concept of biography (see the chapters by Petrik and Salling Olesen in this volume). Biographical perspectives focus on the individual learner's life experiences and their intertwining with societal dynamics as central to learning. "Biography is a social construct that emerges from the interaction between the actions and perspectives of social individuals" (Dausien, 2020, p. 78, translated by the authors).

In the present volume we discover how biographically grounded analysis of learning processes and transitions provides insights into transformations of individual constructions of self and world, the life-world foundation of experience, and, therefore, the situatedness of adult learning. Moreover, in considering the situatedness of learning, we discover insights into how learning is not only a matter of individual acquisition of skill or knowledge, transformation of perspectives,

and personal development but also a thoroughly social phenomenon impacted by multiple factors. Including the notion of learning as a social phenomenon allows us to move beyond the confrontation and separation of individual and society, person and environment, to understanding learning as a part of social practice (see Hof in this volume). Indeed, in considering the situatedness of learning we also discover the roles of political regimes (see Bernhard in this volume), socio-historical frameworks (see Niemeyer-Jensen in this volume), and concrete communities of practice (see Lave et al. in this volume).

In order to see adult learning differently, it is useful to analyse the individual and social situations and biographical dimensions of learning as such. It requires attention to transitions in the life course. While most explanatory accounts of human learning and development across the life course acknowledge transitions through maturation, societal roles, and moral, emotional, and/or cognitive development, in this volume it is understood that times of global change also lead to new challenges. Transitions in the life course under such conditions often require new decisions, knowledges, and skills as well as new worldviews and identities. These learning accomplishments emerge from the practices of individuals, communities, institutions, and political actors (Stauber et al., 2022; Walther et al., 2022). Thus, transitions are shaped by the construction of knowledge and social practices and sometimes result in individual or social learning and the transformation of activities and engagements. Hence, in this volume we discover insights into the learning and development that constitute life course transitions (Bernhard, 2023; Field et al., 2009; Hof & Bernhard, 2025; Merriam, 2005).

Learning, Work, and Work-Life Course

You will find in this book a persistent concern for learning, work, and the work-life course. In the context of broader changes in the world, changes in the relationships between these things have become more complex and more consequential.

It is not only work that is changing; the relationship of work to learning is also shifting. Whereas in the past, learning was treated as subservient to work and society (i.e., a means to improve performance in relatively stable environments), it is now rapidly taking centre stage. The relationship between work and learning is being redefined: learning is not necessarily the sole basis for work (learning for work) nor the result of it (work-based learning). Learning itself becomes the means to address emergent challenges and opportunities. Therefore, we have to talk about learning-based work (Marsick et al., 2022). Moreover, the work-life course is changing. Researching the complex relations between learning and work, biographical experiences and life course situations, and the impact of institutionalised social practices on adult learning becomes increasingly important. We must consider how intentional learning across the length, width, and depth of our lives brings new perspectives to the workplace, generating new knowledge and innovation. At the same time, societal and organisational changes are creating spaces

where people can grow, flourish, and develop. The risks and constraints of these transformations, as well as the benefits, must be respected.

In this book, we discover how work and career life courses appear to have become more and more significant for individuals and their learning (Billett et al., 2021, 2023a, 2023b; Smith, 2023). Indeed, the work-life course is increasingly characterised by a series of complex transitions. Transitions in the life course happen not only when people move from education to work but also when they change working positions or jobs, return to school, or relocate from one place to another in their own country or beyond. Work-life, in other words, is changing and becoming more manifold (Billett et al., 2021). And learning in increasingly varied and complex trajectories of the work-life course entails equally complex relations of individual biography, workplace practices, as well as political, economic, and technological challenges.

The Focus of the Book

Adult Education in Changing Times focuses on adult learning at the nexus of the life course, work, and transitions and relates to individual learning biographies and the challenges and transformations in working life. Seeing learning in terms of relationships between social and personal factors implies consideration of individuals' appraisals of and engagement with experiences and the arrangements that shape this engagement. That is, "experiencing" is a lifelong process.

The chapters pursue complementary theoretical and methodological perspectives on pressing questions in the field of adult learning. They offer accounts that attend to the nexus between the changing world of work and society on the one hand and individuals with their own personal, lived experiences in times of change on the other. Together, they map the relational process between the two, in which the social dimension of being an individual is fundamental. They do so during a time of "liquid modernity" where socio-cultural-political-economic changes are upending the very "rules" of industrial modernity that people have come to take for granted. The authors depict what it means to "see lifelong learning and education differently" from how it was conceptualised and carried out in past, more predictable circumstances. The meaning of learning in the nexus of life course, work, and transitions is being challenged, rethought, and "emergent" because people must learn continually in response to societal, economic, and geopolitical change, and it is time that these phenomena be much better understood.

The authors of the chapters investigate these developments and adopt research perspectives to reinterpret, reimagine, and reconceptualise the intersections, overlaps, insights, and complexities of learning and work, and transitions. They provide insights into facets of this range of educational experiences and the learning that arises from them in its complex interaction with individual biography (Alheit, 2018), political and technological challenges (Harteis & Billett, 2023), and changing workplace practices (Marsick et al., 2022; Watkins &

Marsick, 2023). If learning is viewed as “part of changing practice in a changing world” (Lave, 2019, p. 134), then societal changes and challenges need to be considered alongside both learning across adult lives and the range and kinds of educational experiences they undergo. They analyse these developments in various shifting contexts and circumstances. Collectively, they seek to reflect the relationality between the social, the individual, and the situational dimensions of learning. Consequently, they deal with the nexus of life course, work, and transitions.

Mapping this new research territory leads us to reconsider what this nexus provides for understanding learning in our time. This is a mapping that can help policymakers and government leaders who influence the shape of the terrain; educators, coaches, and counsellors who support learners in these transitions; organisations and institutions that shape environments, practices, and cultures that support human development and growth alongside hybrid intelligence driven by artificial intelligence. It is a mapping that can help individual adult learners who can sometimes no longer depend on schooling and formal education alone to make their way in a world being transformed by intelligent technologies that open up new configurations for pursuing careers, life interests, and livelihoods.

Overview of the Chapters

This volume is organised into sections, each expressing a distinctive theme. In Part I, *Adult Learning at the Nexus of Life, Work and Transitions*, the implications of the described societal changes for learning theory and our understanding of adult education are addressed, beginning with Chapter 2 by **Christiane Hof**. She reconstructs the discursive shift from the political idea of lifelong education to learning in the life course and shows the increasing attention individual learners are being paid. This transformation of the prospects from lifelong education to lifelong learning, she argues, leads to manifold changes in the education sciences. Especially in adult education, we see how researchers are increasingly interested in learning processes. They not only talk about goals of learning and better teaching methods but have also begun to dig deeper into the learning process inside and outside education organisations. In exploring these transformations in the learning discourse, Hof offers empirical insights into the situated embeddedness of lifelong learning. This, she argues, has led to a broader perspective and new capacities to see learning differently. In particular, Hof explains the idea of understanding learning as part of a social practice – and how this can help us to better understand adult learning in a multitude of contexts.

Implications for our understanding of learning are the topic of Chapter 3 by **Michael Bernhard, Stephen Billett, and Katrin Kraus**. They discuss the similarities and distinctions to be found in the various contributions to this book and develop central focus points for understanding learning. Referring to the biographical, the institutional, and the societal contexts of learning, they emphasise

relationality as a theoretical perspective. For learning theory, this implies the relational dimensions between the personal and the social.

In Part II, *Societal Challenges*, we shift gears. These chapters revolve around the theme of societal challenges and their impact on adult learning. This part begins with Chapter 4 based on a dialogue between **Jean Lave**, **Christiane Hof**, and **Michael Bernhard**, who discuss the implications of the thesis that learning in everyday life is always situated. In this edited version of an extended recorded interview, Lave elaborates on her research on learning in communities of practice. She stresses that learning is not to be understood as the acquisition of knowledge but as the transformation of people, both in practice and through practice. Thus, learning can lead to changing social practices. The conversation covers commonalities and differences with other perspectives on learning and presents further developments in “situated learning” in the direction of a critical historical/political relational theory.

In Chapter 5, **Christian Harteis** addresses the challenges presented by one of the key contemporary social transformations, the digitalisation of work, and its consequences for adult education. He focuses on the implications of the digitalisation of work for learning, addressing several central questions. What competencies and skills must workers learn to cope with the new situation? What kind of learning settings might be helpful to support workplace learning?

The next chapter in Part II is Chapter 6 by **Victoria J. Marsick**, **Karen E. Watkins**, and **Rachel Fichter**. They discuss the increasingly dynamic interplay between work and learning and call for new perspectives on the role and purpose of learning in the workplace in light of the growing interdependence among parts of larger networks functioning as ecosystems. Small changes can impact the far reaches of linked systems and disrupt formerly predictable outcomes. While in the past, workplace learning (formal and informal) typically focused on developing knowledge and skills to improve performance based on predetermined standards or competencies linked to an organisation’s strategic goals, more recently (mainly resulting from technological advances), learning has begun to evolve into something more organic and innovative. This chapter explores a distinction between work-based learning (WBL) and learning-based work (LBW). The authors elaborate on the latter by discussing and illustrating five core principles – reflecting on LBW’s relationship to flourishing in a complex, fast-changing world.

Following this, **Jörg Dinkelaker’s** Chapter 7 on “learning by translations” delves into the dynamics of learning in concrete situations. He explores how adult learning occurs in situations where participants engage across differing contexts of knowledge. Building on the concept of *translation*, and based on ethnographic research, he develops a typology of learning configurations that emerge through boundary-crossing: cross-boundary participation, cross-boundary communication, and third-space interaction.

In Part III, *Conceptual and Methodological Approaches to Learning*, the contributors explore various perspectives and insights relating to conceptual and methodological approaches to learning. This section begins with Chapter 8 by **Henning Salling Olesen**, in which he analyses the relationship between the development of work life and individual life courses under the conditions of late capitalism. Using a life history approach, he turns the lens from institutional intervention and curricula to focus on the learner subject through a psycho-societal approach. By reconstructing the intertwining of individual life experience and societal dynamics, he points to the subjective imperatives created by the political tension between demands for a more flexible workforce and individual (and collective) opportunities for self-management, and the shaping of one's own professional life through learning or identity development.

In the Chapter 9, **Michael Bernhard** discusses the influence of labour markets' regimes and migration on individual processes of learning and coping. He uses a concept of regime which refers to networks of rules, norms, and procedures that regularise behaviour, to sensitise us to the complex and contingent interplay of different participants in practices that shape transitions and thus opportunity spaces for learning. He elaborates his argument through two empirical studies of learning processes related to migration and work-life transitions to explain how a regime perspective can broaden our conceptual understanding of learning during life course transitions.

Another concept that influences learning processes is explained by **Beatrix Niemeyer** in Chapter 10, which introduces the concept of space-times of adult education. This concept was developed in cross-cultural, comparative research that faced the challenge of different societal and institutional conditions of work and learning. Through the development of a common working language, Niemeyer-Jensen proposes a theorisation of adult education space-times as a comprehensive approach to conceptualising social and individual transformations in the context of work and occupations from a transnational perspective.

In Chapter 11 by **Stephen Billett**, **Katrin Kraus**, and **Peter H. Sawchuk**, we find a cross-cultural review of what they regard as key learning concepts: *Bildung* originating in Germany, *perezhivanie* originating in Russia, and *phronesis* originating in ancient Greece. The concepts are contextualised, compared, contrasted, and synthesised to reveal both overlaps and divergences. It is argued that understandings of each, both alone and in relation to one another, offer new possibilities for understanding the nexus of the life course, work, and transitions.

Chad Hoggan and **Tetyana Hoggan-Kloubert** discuss Mezirow's theory of transformative learning regarding the intersection of life course, work, and transitions in Chapter 12. They argue that in the transformative learning literature, learning processes are rooted in either constructivist or psychoanalytic perspectives and seen as introspective (e.g., Mezirow's critical self-reflection, Dirx's soul work, Hoggan-Kloubert's narrative reconstruction). Less attention is given to another

essential feature of transformation, the process of daily living and its impact on transformative learning. The authors illustrate this process using the example of a Ukrainian refugee woman in Germany. Everyday routines helped her to cope despite the uncertainties created by her relocation and consequent physical, practical, and emotional liminality – a theme that dominated her life even after several years in Germany. The chapter addresses this lacuna by exploring a situative perspective on context, including our changing positions and roles within lived contexts, the role of daily activities and routines, the role of social activity and influences, and the process of negotiating liminality in daily life. They thereby illustrate that a person is always a person in the world and that people's interactions with the world are primary drivers of transformative learning.

With her concept of “learning in the mode of iteration” (“iterative Bildung”), **Katrin Kraus** attends to the spatial and temporal dimensions of education in Chapter 13. After developing the theoretical perspective of competence development as an iterative process during the life course, she discusses transitions between different forms, spaces, and times of learning and their connection with occupation. In particular, she points to the interplay between experiential and theory-led learning for developing competence and outlines the transitions between them. She shows, on the one hand, that work-oriented learning has a temporal dimension, as it develops biographically over the course of life and concerning work, and on the other hand, that learning in this iterative process takes place in different settings, which can be understood as different learning spaces. The temporal and spatial dimensions of “work-oriented learning in the mode of iteration” related to daily life, the life course, and work are explained by describing the different forms in which learning occurs in different social and physical settings.

Part IV, *Empirical Insights*, features empirical insights at the nexus of life course, work, and transitions. In Chapter 14, **Elisa Thevenot** discusses another big challenge in our world: the question of how to combine work and sustainability. She investigates career transitions as life course phases for rethinking and reordering life priorities and how individuals are learning to accommodate both sustainability and work. Using rhythm analysis, Thevenot reconstructs the ways in which individuals describe their professional trajectories and how they conduct career transitions to a so-called sustainability job. How do they make meaning of their work and relate it to the ecological transition? How do they learn to combine and accommodate these contemporary life course collaterals? Rhythm analysis is used as a heuristic device for analysing individual life courses. Different rhythmic configurations point to the distinct ways in which individuals learn to combine work and sustainability, i.e., colliding rhythms, controlling rhythms, zigzagging rhythms.

Using a biographical approach, **Flora Petrik** aims to better understand how life course, work, and transitions are related, by exploring the learning experiences of first-generation students in Chapter 15. In particular, she is interested in the role of work-related learning experiences in transitions to university. Referring to a theoretical framework that combines a conceptualisation of transitions

as relationally constituted with biographical perspectives on learning processes and Butler's concepts of interpellation and recognition, Petrik analyses the role of work-related learning experiences for the transitions to university. Specifically, she asks how these learning processes are shaped, produced, and experienced. As a result, she unravels work-related learning experiences in these types of transitions as a dynamic interplay of social processes of mis/recognition.

Rob Poell, Cara Valk, and Ferd Van Der Krogt look at the professional development measures organised by managers for employees in Chapter 16. Using a learning network theory, they show empirically that employees and managers each deploy their own strategies and differ in their perspectives on and activities for professional development. On their individual learning paths, employees do not always behave according to the plans designed by managers and educators. Furthermore, both employees' and managers' ideas about organising professional development, the relevant factors involved, and possible future perspectives are usually under-developed. On the basis of their empirical insights, the authors discuss implications for better strategies in organising professional development.

In the epilogue to this volume (Chapter 17), **Katrin Kraus, Victoria J. Marsick, Michael Bernhard, Stephen Billett, Christiane Hof, and Peter H. Sawchuk** reflect on collaboratively researching adult learning and discuss opportunities and challenges for future research, practice, and policy.

Closing Thoughts for Moving Forward

The early part of this introduction presented a series of key questions that are seen as pressing for all the contributors to this volume and previewed the kinds of answers to be found in their chapters. It is worth recalling that both the questions and the answers were based upon a set of four premises: concerns for (a) relations of learning inside and outside formal education, (b) biography and life course transitions, (c) the social/political/economically situatedness of learning, and (d) the unique roles and impacts of work. Taken together, what emerges is an overarching theme of seeing learning differently at an important nexus: the nexus of the life course, work, and transitions.

We have summarised how the volume's sequencing of contributions sets the stage for deeper understandings of learning at this nexus. Thus, the implications for adult learning theories in relation to societal, political, economic, and environmental change are central to the material offered in Part I. These insights are in turn complemented by those in Part II, which focus on the impacts of specific societal challenges on learning and the life course, and Part III, which explores additional conceptual and methodological concerns. In Part IV, empirical investigations take the spotlight, offering a variety of analytical claims of their own. And while distinctive contributions are made in each chapter and part of the volume, by design our collection also supports any number of creative, dialogic readings – readings through which arguments offered in any one area of the book can be used to inform, challenge, refract, or synthesise those found elsewhere.

As said previously, this collection provides what we refer to as an original mapping of new research territory. It aims to assist scholars as well as many others – from policy-makers to educators, trainers, and counsellors and coaches to organisational leaders, and individuals simply seeking to “bounce forward” – in uncertain times. It is a response, in other words, to new challenges. Thus, in a range of original ways the chapters of this book offer a means of more effectively understanding how the increasing complexity of adult learning at the nexus of the life course, work, and transitions demand new, deeper, and broader considerations of why adult learning – in all its forms, across all its dimensions, and within all its contexts – is now more central than ever to the successful facing of these challenges.

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2

FROM THE POLITICAL IDEA OF LIFELONG EDUCATION TO LEARNING IN THE LIFE COURSE AS PART OF SOCIAL PRACTICE

Christiane Hof

Introduction

Discourses about adult learning are closely connected to the idea of lifelong education and the planning of learning opportunities for people at all stages of their lives. As well as investigating adult education organisations and concepts of curriculum and teaching, researchers increasingly look into individual learning processes that occur inside and outside education institutions. This shift of focus from lifelong education to lifelong learning offers the possibility of a better understanding of learning over the life course. The growing number of studies of lifelong learning processes highlight the influence of socio-economic and socio-cultural aspects of learning. Too little attention has been paid to the situation, in which learning is embedded. I argue in this chapter that a perspective that views learning as a part of social practice allows us to broaden our view and to understand learning as a nexus of the life course, work, and transition.

First, I summarise the discourses about lifelong education and the shift to learning in the life course and suggest it as a useful way of seeing lifelong learning differently. Next, informed by recent empirical studies that emphasise the social embeddedness of lifelong learning, I discuss the idea of seeing learning over the life course as part of social practice. Drawing on practice theoretical approaches that focus on learning from a situated learning perspective, I describe lifelong learning as becoming, a situated process of individual transformation and social recognition. The final section discusses the implications of this point of view for research into lifelong learning.

A Short Reconstruction of the Lifelong Learning Discourse

From lifelong education to lifelong learning

Since the 1960s, the OECD and UNESCO have discussed questions of education and qualifications by talking about “lifelong education” (Aspin et al., 2001; Hof, 2022; OECD, 1973; Tuijnman & Boström, 2002). Triggered by the diagnosis of an outdated education system that no longer met the challenges of modern society, an international discussion started that focused on education and enhancing learning. Education and learning were seen as central factors in social and economic development. With this in mind, the European Commission proclaimed lifelong learning as a strategy for Europe “to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world” (Commission of the European Communities, 2001, p. 1). Educational institutions were hence expected to offer learning opportunities to fit this goal. Additionally, they should help to improve participation in adult education organisations.

Thus, lifelong learning can be understood as a political programme aimed at increasing education and training for strategic goals because they are an “investment” in the future (OECD, 1996, p. 90). They should play a vital role in supporting society and economy, and in helping citizens to find personal fulfilment and well-being, and to engage in active and responsible citizenship (CEU, 2021).

Though lifelong education remains a political programme, the discourse around it has been transformed – and expanded into a lifelong learning discourse. When the OECD paper published in 1996 talked about “lifelong learning of all”, it emphasised that this had come to mean not just adult education but all learning, from cradle to grave. According to this definition, lifelong learning is not only something gained from being taught but also a conscious activity grounded in motivation and learning capacities. Learning is thus understood as a conscious activity that people engage in to acquire knowledge, skills, or abilities. This lifelong learning framework highlights that learning occurs during the whole course of a person’s life. Formal education contributes to learning, but so do non-formal and informal settings in the home, the workplace, the community, and society (Commission of the European Communities, 2001, p. 9); thus, the definition of lifelong learning is extended. Critics have pointed out that in this conception, “responsibility is passed to individuals to renew their skills regularly to ensure their employability” (Coffield, 1999/2024, p. 91).

From lifelong learning to learning over the life course

The turn to lifelong learning fostered new empirical approaches to the study of learning: it has since been seen as not only a political goal but also a scientific perspective interested in learning over the life course (Alheit & Dausien,

2002; Hof, 2022; Jarvis, 2025; Passarelli & Kolb, 2020). Some researchers are interested in the development of learning activities and learning outcomes (Ruhose et al., 2019; Schuller & Desjardins, 2010). Oriented in sociological life course research (Elder, 1998, 2009; Wingens, 2022), scientists reconstruct the sequence of (learning) activities and life events in their societal, social, and institutional contexts (Bernardi et al., 2019). Like other longitudinal studies, for example, the NEPS study “Educational Trajectories in Germany” (Allmendinger et al., 2019) investigates how the level of education develops from childhood to old adulthood and how education affects the rest of life. Learning in the life course is analysed as linking education activities, competencies, and returns (e.g., professional position, income) over the life span. Such empirical studies have shown that historical and social influences, prior knowledge, and individual interests influence the forms and outcomes of lifelong learning (Weinert et al., 2023).

In contrast to the life course researchers who analyse the performed learning activities, biographical research scholars focus on learners’ subjective perspectives and patterns of interpretation. They reconstruct the biographical interpretations of life experiences and transformation processes. The detailed biographical case analyses also provide insights into the unique nature of learning over the life course and show that learning involves cognition, reflection, and reflexivity and is characterised by transformational processes as theorised in other traditions (Mezirow, 2000).

At the same time, the case studies stress that individual learning is embedded in the individual life worlds, which could be analysed as “learning environments” or “learning milieus.” Dausien vividly describes the situational embeddedness of learning using the image of a construction site:

“Life is a construction site”, and learning is the constructive process in which experiences and meaning are produced from actions and experiences. Which biographical meaning, which knowledge configurations arise, depends on the one hand on the “material” and the tools available on site, and on the other hand on the scope for concrete action, for initial testing, and repeated new attempts . . . for mistakes, modifications, and new drafts; finally, also on the communicative space for individual and joint reflection.

(Dausien, 2008, p. 167, translated by CH)

Both empirical life course research and biographical studies have contributed new insights into learning over the life course. Learning is now seen as a lifelong activity embedded throughout life. Furthermore, life course studies have shown the path dependencies and ways in which disparities between people arising from their previous life situation and biography continue to have an impact later in life (Bernardi et al., 2019).¹

Widening the perspective from learning as individual transformation to socially embedded process

In the research programmes described earlier, lifelong learning is treated as an individual learning process occurring under different social conditions, in various life situations and phases. Thus, it has been described as a life-long and life-wide process (Alheit & Dausien, 2002) that should be recognised as an individual transformation process (Hof, 2017; Mezirow, 2000). Besides reconstructing transformative learning processes, scholars point to the fact that learning occurs in particular social settings or learning spaces (Illeris, 2007).

Bronfenbrenner has distinguished between the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The micro-level has received much attention: researchers describe learning at this level as a way of coping with life changes (Bernhard, 2023; Hof & Bernhard, 2024; Merriam, 2005; Nicolaides et al., 2022). At the macro-level, socio-economic status and cultural capital, among other influencing factors, have been described as opportunities for (or restrictions to) learning (Buchmann & Steinhoff, 2017; Levy & Bühlmann, 2016; OECD, 2017). Less attention has been paid to the meso-level, the *interactions*, and the *social practices* in which individuals and their activities are embedded. Yet this layer is crucial for understanding lifelong learning processes.

Seeing Learning Differently

Learning from a situated learning perspective

The idea of learning as a socially embedded practice is very much linked to the work of Lave and Wenger (1991). Their ethnographic studies of apprenticeship processes in different work contexts and communities of practice show that learning takes place through participation in social situations. Therefore, they understand it as neither an individual nor a social phenomenon; instead, it is “an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 31). The learner is seen as a person “interested in participation in certain kinds of activities rather than accumulating private possessions” (Sfard, 1998, p. 6). Learning happens “not in the head or outside it but in the relationship between the person and the world, which for human beings is a social person in a social world” (Wenger, 2010, p. 179). Consequently, learning is strongly linked to participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 54) and understood “as a process of becoming a member of a certain community” (Wenger, 2010, p. 179).

As central dimensions of situated learning, Lave & Wenger (1991) list “relations between newcomers and old-timers, activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practices” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29). All these dimensions are mutually related, and therefore, “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 integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world” (p. 35). From this concept of learning “as a dimension of social practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 47), two research perspectives emerge: one investigates the social situation and its impact on individual learning, while the other analyses individual learning processes concerning social practices.

Learning from a practical theoretical point of view

Newer practice theories also point to social activities as a central focus for research (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 1996, 2002; Shove et al., 2012). They start with the idea that the social is constituted not by intentional actors but by a nexus of actions and words conceptualised as practice. According to Schatzki,

practices are organised nexuses of actions. This means that the doings and sayings composing them hang together. More specifically, the doings and sayings that compose a given practice are linked through (1) practical understanding, (2) rules, (3) a teleoaffective structure, and (4) general understandings. Together, the understandings, rules and teleoaffective structure that link the doings and sayings of a practice form its organisation.

(Schatzki, 2002, p. 77)

From this perspective, learning is defined as acquiring the knowledge and skills needed to participate in practices. Well-known here is Wenger’s notion of “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1998, 2001, 2009). He developed the idea that “members of a community of practice develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems – in short, a shared practice” (Wenger, 2001, p. 2340). In families, work groups, and organisations, people share tasks, knowledge, ways of talking about experiences, methods for doing things, and identities, understood as ways of describing the community and the individual’s role in it (cf. Wenger, 2009, p. 211). Lave repeatedly emphasises that learning in the process of participation in situated practices is more than the acquisition of community-relevant knowledge and skills (Lave, 2019, pp. 133–157). The communities-of-practice approach defines learning as a socialisation process, the enculturation of the person in each social community.

Being “enabled to participate in practice” (Alkemeyer & Buschmann, 2017, p. 22) is seen as the result of learners’ participation in specific social practices: “people (trans)form themselves via their engagement as recognisable subjects and cultivate their play-ability by learning to comply with the normative standards unfolding in praxis” (p. 9). In this regard, the concept of practice architectures developed by Kemmis et al. can be seen as an attempt to analyse the learning possibilities offered by social situations (Grootenboer et al., 2017, p. 8; Kemmis et al., 2014). Research into the structures of practice aims at discovering

what spaces enable learning and educative experiences and therefore offer possibilities for transformation and change (see also Bernhard, 2026).

Whereas these approaches investigate the social situation and established social practices and their impact on individual learning, others start by analysing individual activities and forms of participation in social practices. Focusing on individual activities and forms of participation in social practices allows us to reveal learning trajectories and to understand *learning as becoming* (Hager & Hodkinson, 2011).

Lifelong learning as becoming

The notion of learning as becoming can be related to Barad's agential realism and the idea of understanding agency not as a characteristic of an individual but as a doing. In contrast to an interactionist perspective, she talks about "intra-action," stressing that knowledge is constituted by a mutual process of discourses, materialities, and practices (Barad, 2003).

From a more traditional interactionist and subject-related perspective, Hager and Hodkinson (2011) argue that the metaphor of learning as "becoming" allows us to see the whole social person. In other words, "the metaphor of learning as becoming can overcome unhelpful dichotomies of mind and body, individual and social, between structure and agency" (p. 44). However, like Barad, they focus on learning as a process and are interested in the factors that influence it. They argue that learning "entails participation in something, whether that something be a classroom, a workplace, a leisure activity or family life" (p. 42), and therefore, they say, is influenced by cultural and situated practices (p. 42).

The learning cultures of the contexts in which learning takes place change and are constructed and reconstructed through the practices and interrelationships between participants as part of the wider field of force. However, it is rarely possible to separate out simple causal relationships. Rather, as Lave and Wenger (1991) argue, learning is relational, in the sense that many complex factors, influences and processes are inter-related . . . specifically, individual workers/learners influence the learning cultures they participate in, and vice versa.

(Hager & Hodkinson, 2011, p. 43)

By considering learning as relational, with a focus on the relationship between the situation and the individual's change and consolidation, the authors regard learning as a process. Drawing on Barad, we could argue that they view learning not only as a transformation of the person but as a socially embodied process of doing.

Learning as becoming implies that the person participates in situated practices. This participation can be seen as a practice based on particular competencies, materialities, and meanings (Shove et al., 2012, p. 24). And "in the moment of doing, practitioners (those who do) simultaneously reproduce the practices in which they are engaged and the elements of which these practices are made"

(p. 22). By performing or “doing” a particular practice, e.g., driving a car, individuals develop the ability to perform this activity and the chain of activities that constitute the social practice of driving. Considering the practice of driving as an individual’s learning, we can see that participation leads to knowledge about cars and understanding traffic regulations, the practical skills needed to start the engine and to back into a parking space, and last but not least, the development of a forward-looking perspective on the traffic situation. To become drivers, learners need not only to describe themselves as capable of driving (doing something) but also to have others see them as competent. In other words, becoming involves developing competencies, self-perception, and recognition from others. Additionally, the process of becoming is based on materialities (e.g., a car) and knowledge or meaning that links competence, material, and meaning. This link has been described by Schatzki as a nexus of doings and sayings (Schatzki, 2002, p. 77). Together with recognition from others, we can call this individual transformation a process of becoming.

With the idea of becoming or learning as becoming, a new perspective on learning appears:

Instead of an individual, mentalist, rationalist, elitist, ahistorical, acontextual dualistic view of learning, there is a dialectical, historical, contextual understanding of learning as an aspect of the activities in which persons are constituted by, and constitute themselves in, participation in communities of practice.
(Lave & Packer, 2008, pp. 33–34)

This dialectic view offers the possibility of talking about learning trajectories embedded in the life course.

Learning trajectories as participation in social practices

From a practice theoretical perspective, lifelong learning is a process. As Schatzki (2022, p. 22) points out, life can be treated as an “individual behavioral process” (Bernardi et al., 2019, p. 2) of overlapping activities. These are constituted in bodily actions and sayings performed by a self-conscious, living person who is partly defined by the world through which they proceed and by the socially established understanding and rules that dictate behaviour within a practice (Schatzki, 2002, p. 27). Regarding learning, Schatzki (2017) argues that people need to acquire the knowledge necessary to participate in these practices. The learning process requires participation, and the development of a practical understanding is a reaction to the socially expected activities and situated forms of interactions. Life trajectories, therefore, are a series of discontinuous episodes which can be separated into life phases and transitions (Kohli, 2007). According to the practice theoretical approach, “action sequences are shaped by the social practices they pass through” (Schatzki, 2022, p. 26).

From this perspective, life is understood as a trajectory that not only reflects the diversity of life domains – as sociological life course research points – or the individual meaning-making and transformation – as biographical research points. Practice theories add that the various practices and series of discontinuous episodes of acting constitute life. These practices and episodes are socially constituted, embedded in and created by space-time paths, a sequence of activities, and a structured arc of past and future. “This is because an action always occurs in a context that includes the actor’s earlier actions and that itself helps form the context in which her subsequent actions take place” (Schatzki, 2022, p. 24).

In every life trajectory, many activities and practices are performed. Hence a person participates not only in one community of practice but in different situations. Therefore, life trajectories are composed of an assembly of multiple practices. They “are made and made possible in ongoing relations of participation in practice” (Lave, 1997, p. 131). Dreier (1999) adds that “social practice is not homogenous. It consists of diverse, located contextual practices which are linked in a social structure” (p. 7). Regarding life trajectories, subjects do not only participate in different socially structured practices at the same time, but might also change their interest and their stance on participation in certain social practices. “When subjects move from one context into another, their structure of personal relevance changes” (p. 12). Furthermore, he argues,

the particular way subjects configure their participation in the present context does not depend on that context alone. Since social contexts are interrelated in the structure of social practice and since subjects conduct their lives by taking part in several contexts, these interrelations and subjects’ concerns in other contexts matter to them. Their reasons to participate in a particular way in the present context are also related in various ways to their concerns in other parts of their lives in other contexts.

(Dreier, 1999, p. 11)

In other words, the practice theoretical perspective on lifelong learning offers diverse insights into the relationship of social practices to learning. While sociologists underline the influence of the social situation to explain an individual’s learning, researchers like Lave and Dreier postulate a dialectical perspective (see Lave et al., 2026). They argue that whereas social institutions and social practices are significant in shaping life courses, they do not determine the conduct of life. Rather, the various institutionalised social practices provide opportunities for participation. Whether specific people participate in them, and in which communities of practice they participate, is a result neither solely of the person’s intention nor of the social or cultural expectations. Instead, it is the specific relations between the two because “trajectories of participation involve movement across space, place and communities of practice” (Lave, 1997, p. 132). Additionally, as Dreier argues, “comprehensive processes of learning are involved in the unfolding and change of

a personal conduct of life and life trajectory. This learning is in principle unending and calls for many forms of reconsideration and re-learning” (1999, p. 20). He points out that “this approach opens the door to seeing personal learning and development through participation and as participation in structures of social practice” (p. 30). Following these arguments, we must consider the various ways in which individuals shape their lives and “do biography” to shed light on their lifelong learning processes.

Outlook: Researching Lifelong Learning Processes in the Light of Practice Theory

Based on the assumption that it is not an individual’s intentions but their practices and activities that we should focus on, a study of the learning process would start with the investigation of activities. In this last section, I analyse a research project that investigated lifelong learning in the light of practice theory. Penuel et al. (2017) are interested in learning trajectories and asked learners to recount their experiences of participating in changing practices. They present the case of a young man, called Jerome, who was part of a study programme intended to support pathways into science. The interviewer asked about his activities and the purposes of his participation, as well as his current involvement in activities and networks. He was also asked about obstacles encountered and whether he expected to participate in the programme in future. Besides the forms of participation in different social settings, the researchers sought to uncover any reasons he had against participation. Those interviews helped to map Jerome’s activities, including the continuities and discontinuities in his participation over time and across multiple settings. The unit of analysis is a *person in practice*. “Informed by our theoretical orientation to learning as movement, the interviews purposefully elicited youths’ perspectives on how their participation changed over time and across different settings” (Penuel et al., 2017, p. 34).

In the beginning, Jerome experienced discontinuities between his daily life and the social settings of the workplace. “Over time, his sense of difference from others faded as he deepened relationships with others through retreats and a levelled role structure” (Penuel et al., 2017, p. 34). In the long run, he learned how to join in the ongoing activities and developed a different attitude to science. His goal changed from having a career in basic science to becoming a university teacher. The “opportunity to participate in and move across varied settings was central to his developing sense of future possibilities” (p. 36).

By mapping the changing practices of participation over time, individual evolutions in knowledge and skills can be identified and their analysis can reveal information about the changing settings of practice, networks of actors, and institutionalised structures that shape the opportunities for learning. Such analysis highlights “the ways that existing institutional structures of practice frame the choices people make about how and where to participate in activities” (Penuel et al., 2017,

p. 30). It also offers the possibility of discovering which conditions support and constrain participation.

An approach to learning that emphasises the realised and declined participation in various social practices over the life course allows us to discover stances on social settings and forms of participation. It thus helps us to understand changes in competencies and knowledge in relation to social practices that are seen to be helpful for participation and make these changes possible. In other words, studying trajectories of participation in changing practices can shed light on the forms of transformation of the person with a special focus on the mutual relationships between institutional structures and social support. This perspective also confirms the idea that lifelong learning is part of the ongoing life activity (cf. Lave, 2019, p. 27).

Conclusions

In this chapter's discussion of adult education discourse and the transformation from lifelong education to lifelong learning as part of social practices, I have shown that there exist various theoretical perspectives and research concepts that see learning differently and can improve research programmes. It was not my goal to advocate for a particular research programme, but it has been shown that we should emphasise the following perspectives:

- Focusing on the meso-level opens up the possibility of paying particular attention to the *activities and social practices* realised during learning processes.
- By describing learning as part of social practices, we can consider the move from analysis of various separate aspects of learning to the reconstruction of *learning as an entire process of becoming*. This implies focusing on the individual's development of knowledge, skills, and stances as well as their changing participation in social practices, and any refusals to engage in particular practices.
- Regarding *learning as situated practice*, we must consider the various dimensions that constitute the social situation, particularly relations between participants, artefacts, and ideas about what is relevant. Additionally, the modes of social interaction and the material and discursive conditions that configure the learning space must be understood as potential constraints or affordances of the learning situation. This includes the reconstruction of learning architectures as factors that can support or hinder lifelong learning.
- Seeing learning as an ongoing life activity requires the reconstruction of the individual's process of becoming in its individual and social dimensions of recognition.
- Finally, it is important to recognise that conceptualising lifelong learning as learning trajectories and seeing these trajectories as part of social practice invites us to consider the learner's participation in changing practices. Analysis of learning might then focus on the different forms of participation in social practice, including changes in the learner's activities, personal orientations, and stances, as well as the influence of social recognition on individual transformation processes.

In conclusion, the described shift from lifelong education to lifelong learning as part of social practice should be seen as not only a change in the topics of adult learning discourse but also as a way to seeing learning differently and to developing further our understanding of adult learning.

Note

- 1 Moreover, the analysis of learning processes over the life course shows the impact of transitions in the life course as an impetus for learning (Hof & Bernhard, 2025).

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3

LEARNING AT THE NEXUS OF LIFE COURSE, WORK, AND TRANSITIONS

Relational Processes Between the Personal and the Social

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and Katrin Kraus*

Introduction: Learning at the Nexus of Life Course, Work, and Transitions

Learning in the context of changes to the working lives and personal circumstances of adults occurs regularly, at work and elsewhere, prompted by changing social norms, institutional imperatives, and personal, family, and societal needs. These changes and learning processes are most likely to occur as regular elements of everyday adult life as well as through experiences in education institutions and programmes. From the perspective of the person, both are related. Learning, therefore, does not simply or only occur through participation in education programmes; it is ubiquitous, happening continuously through adults' lives (Hof et al., 2026). It arises and is supported and guided in various ways across the range of social institutions and circumstances in which individuals think and act. Learning in various forms is particularly relevant for initiating and enabling transitions in working life, accompanies it, and arises from negotiating those transitions (Billett et al., 2021; Hof & Bernhard, 2025; Stauber et al., 2022).

Defining learning in this way is based on the processes in which individuals navigate their (working) lives through activities outside educational institutions and therefore often not considered as contexts for learning. In fact, most of learning of adults, after they have completed their initial occupational training, occurs outside programmes of intentional education and, usually, after they have finished their compulsory education (Billett et al., 2023). Moreover, rather than being mediated by educators, that learning will most likely arise through the selective efforts of, decisions about engagement with, and the interests and senses of self of the adults themselves (Billett et al., 2022). Against the orthodoxies of schooled societies, it is important to remember that learning is something that people do for themselves

and cannot be done for them. As acknowledged in various forms of constructivism, by Piaget (1971), Vygotsky (1978), and Bruner (2009), people are the meaning makers. That active process leads to changes in what individuals know (i.e., conceptual knowledge), can do (i.e., procedural knowledge), sense (i.e., perceptibility), and value (i.e., dispositional knowledge).

Learning arises from how adults respond to experiences they encounter and how they bring to bear what they sense, know, can do, and value when negotiating those experiences, e.g., in the context of manifold transitions in their (working) lives. Through the process of “experiencing”, they construe and construct forms of knowledge (Billett, 2023; Dewey, 1938). This is not to suggest that an external motivation or experience always drives learning, as it can be driven by imagined experiences. But, it is often the case that it arises inter-psychologically – through experiences that arise beyond the skin, so to speak, particularly when working-age adults have experiences of goal-directed activities and interactions as they seek to stay in paid employment and develop further their work biography.

The analysis of adult learning cannot be limited, then, to what is afforded by education programmes, offered through institutions whose purpose is to support learning (e.g., through tertiary education provision and continuing education), yet do so in social and physical circumstances remote from where the knowledge learnt and abstracted is intended to be used. While the role of these institutions is to bring about changes in what people know, sense, can do, and value, they inevitably face the transfer problem (Pea, 1987; Royer et al., 2005). The individuals are often left to figure out how to apply what they have learnt in such institutions to the circumstances, tasks and problems they encounter in their working lives (Lobato, 2012; Lobato et al., 2012). So, it must be understood that learning that occurs in different social and physical circumstances affords distinct kinds of experiences and diverse kinds of support and guidance. Though these experiences are qualitatively distinct from the learning supported through teaching in structured education programmes, they also create their own challenges and opportunities, strengths and limitations. What is common across them is that, ultimately, it is the individuals who mediate what they experience and who come to learn through those experiences (i.e., change what they know, can do, sense, and value) – albeit inside or outside educational programmes and institutions.

The contributions to this volume explore a range of contexts in which individuals learn through their adult lives. These contributions embrace different research strands, methodologies, and orientations, but all with a shared interest in understanding how learning occurs and is supported in the context of transitions and changing (working) lives. This learning could either happen through and within intentionally designed learning spaces, or with a focus on environments, cultures, and social affordances that motivate or support learners in their growth and development outside of formal education institutions. In both cases, learning is about individual meaning-making in and active engagement with specific circumstances. Seeing the activities and interactions that comprise processes of learning more

inclusively is respectful of how adults come to learn and the circumstances in which they learn.

Broadening the view of how learning occurs represents a significant expansion of what is considered “learning”, moving beyond a narrow focus on formal schooling and training (i.e., intentionally delivered educational programmes) to encompass learning in everyday life – at work, in the community and within the family (Hof et al., 2026). Consequently, research in this domain highlights that learning is central to changing practice in a changing world (Lave et al., 2026). These considerations offer insights into lifelong learning at the nexus of a changing world of work and society on the one hand, and individuals with their own personal, lived experiences and agendas in times of change on the other. The contributions to this volume map the relational and interdependent processes at this nexus, for which the social dimension of being an individual is fundamental. The relational aspect is vouchsafed because, what is projected by the social world is never completely clear or unambiguous as to have just one meaning. As Newman et al. (1989) state, if any suggestion were clear and unambiguous there would be little need to communicate. Moreover, Berger and Luckman (1967) point out that it would be overly ambitious to expect that the social suggestion would be uniformly engaged with and understood by individuals. This underscores the interdependent, relational way that individuals make meaning of what they experience (Billett, 2006). This is because the basis of that meaning making is a product of how individuals construe and construct knowledge, which involves a process of remaking, not just copying, which, again, is unlikely to be uniform because it is a person-dependent process developed biographically in the course of a life and therefore based on previous experiences. Thus, what for one individual might be a helpful suggestion for another might be an unwelcome imposition and for a third person something incomprehensible.

Thus, rather than seeking confident assertions about how adults can negotiate these transitions, we need to understand the relational links between what is suggested by the outer world in the context of personal transitions and social change, and individual negotiations of them. Therefore, exploring learning at the *nexus* of life course, work and transitions means accounting for the relationships between transitions and change and the processes in which individuals try to deal with them. Furthermore, *nexus* points to the interfaces of societal contexts at the levels of discourses, institutions, organisations, and specific sites of learning. Lastly, specific qualities and characteristics of learning emerge when learning is explored at the intersection of life course, work, and transitions: learning appears as a matter of positionality and subjectivity, is characterised by translation and transitions, and is about relating knowledge and (life) experience.

The account proposed here invites readers to conceive the purposes, processes, contexts, and qualities of adult learning in the context of change and transitions – more inclusively and more expansively, taking into account the complex societal, social, and situated landscapes they traverse in their (working) lives; these

include but are far from defined by those afforded by programmes taught in educational institutions, often labelled as lifelong education or continuing education.

In this chapter, distinctive as well as common threads in the discussions in the other chapters in this book will be drawn out, which point to what it means to see learning differently. First, the main insights into adult learning offered by the chapters are discussed via the key themes of purposes, processes, societal contexts, and qualities. In a second step, relationality as a central concept for seeing learning differently at the nexus of life course, work, and transition will be discussed.

Seeing Learning Differently: Lessons Learnt From This Volume

Purposes: learning to navigate and shape societal change

Individuals are situated in a complex and rapidly changing world, characterised by a “liquid modernity” (Bauman, 2013) where established rules and norms are being continuously upended by socio-cultural-political-economic changes (Hof et al., 2026). Implicitly or explicitly, adults are required to understand, cope with, and perhaps even thrive on these challenges as they learn to navigate them (Hof & Bernhard, 2025). As the chapters of this volume show, learning becomes a way for people to deal with and affect major societal changes, including the transformation of workplaces, the accelerating digitalisation of work-life, along with a growing use of artificial intelligence and ecological transitions associated with climate change and concerns about sustainability. Marsick et al. (2026) argue that new environments of complexity and unpredictability at the workplace push individuals to develop new strategies, to learn to abandon old habits of mind and think outside the box. For those in a world where work becomes “a process of emergence and possibility rather than predictability”, learning can no longer primarily be seen as precursor or accessory to work – work itself becomes intertwined with learning as “learning-based work”. Given that change is constant and everywhere, it is through ongoing (collective) learning in liminal spaces – i.e., creative spaces at system boundaries – that these new, complex, and unpredictable environments can be navigated.

A shift to learning-based work that challenges individuals to navigate increasingly complex environments can be observed in the digitalisation of work and the proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI). Harteis (2026) points out that technical and organisational innovations have shaped work-life ever since the invention of the wheel. However, the increase in complexity and speed and the shift to internet-based work organisation associated with the digital transformation points to a new quality of change that individuals are called upon to navigate and shape. The growing adoption of digital tools and rapidly expanding capabilities of AI and robotics mean that entire occupations will either become superfluous or human capabilities will be enlarged by these technologies. In each of these scenarios – replacement or tooling – learning becomes the way that adults will navigate their work-lives and workplaces as they change.

Consideration of individuals' learning to navigate societal changes raises questions of temporality. After all, change occurs and shapes individuals' lives at paces that are experienced differently, at times coming too quickly, at other times too slowly. As Thevenot (2026) shows for sustainability and environmental change, societal change plays out in particular temporal configurations at the nexus of work and sustainability that individuals experience and engage with differently. Learning, in her view, is not only about grasping the details of climate change and planetary transformation but also about relating to change by cultivating awareness of rhythms in life histories.

These observations point to the multi-faceted ways in which learning supports the navigation of societal change. There are deeper insights to be gained into adults' learning at the nexus of a changing world of work and society, on the one hand, and individuals' own personal, lived experience in times of change, on the other. Thus, the chapters in this volume variously consider the relationship between social change and the processes in which individuals engage with and address it. The relationship is not unidirectional in the sense that individuals simply adapt to change but rather encompasses processes of agency, of people being able to shape societal and institutional contexts and practices, as the authors explain from different perspectives (Bernhard, 2026; Hof, 2026; Lave et al., 2026; Niemeyer, 2026; Petrik, 2026; Poell et al., 2026).

Processes: learning taking place in biographies, everyday life, and liminal spaces

As the authors in this book elaborate in different ways, learning can be considered a moment in which a person re-configures their relation to their self and the world, engaging with a world full of transitions and changing what they sense, know, can do, and value (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2026; Kraus, 2026; Billett et al., 2026; Niemeyer, 2026). Learning is conceived of as both temporal and processual. It is about relating the "moment in time", temporally vis-à-vis earlier experiences and future expectations, socially vis-à-vis other people in society, communities, families, at the workplace, etc., and spatially vis-à-vis physical environments and sites of learning that emerge in different places. All these are important dimensions of understanding learning differently and as a relational process. As the chapters in this book detail in diverse ways, learning emerges biographically, is embedded in everyday life, and takes place in liminal (transitional) spaces.

Learning emerges biographically

Learning is a process that spans the entire course of life and as such should always be understood as lifelong learning, embedded within personal biographies that can be seen as subjective interpretations of life course events through the lens of social and individually constructed self-images. Hof and Kraus emphasise this in their

contributions. Hof (2026) describes learning as “a socially embedded process” that is far more than an individual transformation, viewing “lifelong learning as becoming”. For Kraus (2026), the process of lifelong learning as work-related learning is closely linked to individual work biographies, which simultaneously encompass opportunities, occasions, and necessities for learning through temporal and spatial dimensions of iteratively establishing the relationship between work and learning. The iterative process of work-related learning occurs “as implicit, explicit, experimental and reflective learning” throughout the work biography.

What Hof and Kraus explain theoretically is demonstrated by empirical studies conducted by Bernhard (2026) and Thevenot (2026). Learning is an integral element of biographical projects; it accompanies these projects, provoking learning. Without learning – defined here as a change in what somebody senses, knows, can do, and values – these biographical projects would falter, be incoherent, and never come to fruition. The aspect of changing values that initiates such a biographical project is at the centre of Thevenot’s chapter. She illustrates how individuals are going through career transitions in a society where sustainability is increasingly important. Engaging with this societal change, people embark on biographical projects of transitioning to a career that better serves sustainability goals than their previous jobs. This process is biographically embedded; that is, it is connected to the previous employment biography and relates to expectations or hopes of future employment. Bernhard (2026) illustrates the biographical nature of learning in the context of migration. He points out that biographical projects such as migration are not only embedded in the migrants’ life histories and their search for a better future but also always occur in the structural conditions of migration or labour market regimes. The feasibility of achieving the desired goals of such projects, as well as what can be learnt during the process, depends on the framework conditions, such as regulations, available opportunities, and professional services. If learning is regarded as a biographically anchored process, it is therefore by no means reduced to the personal dimension but is closely linked to social framework conditions.

Learning is embedded in everyday life

The emphasis on lifelong learning also fosters an understanding of the life-wide dimension of learning. Learning has traditionally been situated within pedagogical institutions, the responsibility of schools, vocational education colleges, and universities. The scope and opportunities for learning that they provide are a significant social achievement and contribution, but educative experiences (Dewey, 1938) extend far beyond the confines of such institutions. Learning in those institutions still tends to be an exception for adults since they spend most of their time engaged in daily routines related to work, family, friends, politics, and community. Everyday life is thus an important social and physical context for learning, as Lave emphasises in many of her works on situated learning. In her chapter with Hof and Bernhard, she emphasises the core of a different perspective on learning:

“considering the relationship between individual engagement and social affordances and learning opportunities” (Lave et al., 2026). Learning occurs within the complex social relations of everyday life and as a practice. It is not only embedded in this “daily business”; it is an integral part of it.

The rich potential of everyday life for learning could be observed with attention to minute details, particularly when daily routines must change in response to external circumstances, or because the conditions of everyday life have altered radically. That could be due to bodily conditions caused by accident or disability; to family reasons that cause transitions, such as the birth of children; or to other biographical transitions, such as moving out of the family home to start university studies. Such change could also be provoked by migration, leading to the need to build a new everyday life in an unfamiliar environment where social relations must be newly established (see Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2026).

These cases not only demonstrate that everyday life brims with learning opportunities but also highlight two other significant points. First, routines of daily life are rich in prerequisites for learning and closely interwoven with the social contexts and constellations in which people live. They must learn to (re)build and shape their daily lives – must learn to sense, to know, and to do things, and to value. And second, if the conditions for this daily life change, people must engage in the transformation and re-learn how they come to know, do, and value through active processes of knowing (i.e., learning) in establishing a new daily life.

Learning needs liminal spaces

A third aspect of the process of lifelong learning is essential if learning is to be seen more broadly. Learning as a moment in time requires momentum in the flow of biographical times and the routines of everyday life and needs liminal spaces. These liminal spaces can emerge in various places and settings. The chapters in this volume present a diverse array of opportunities in which liminal spaces for learning and development are created. If learning is to be perceived differently, then there is a need to visit these spaces to observe learning and reconstruct the conditions under which it occurs, as well as explore how liminal spaces for learning develop.

Marsick et al. (2026) investigate how these liminal spaces might emerge in the workplace due to an “increasingly dynamic interplay between work and learning”. However, it is not solely this dynamic, complexity, and unpredictability that create liminal spaces for learning. The social context at work, a strong sense of purpose, and the role of the professional, which is based not only on subject matter expertise but also on the ability to create learning-rich cultures, are equally important. Learning-based work, as Marsick et al. call it, is closely aligned with the pole of situated learning within this range, as it cannot occur outside the authentic working process. Participation in labour market education and training also lies within the continuum of how work and learning are intertwined but leans more towards the other pole of organised learning. Liminal (i.e., transformative) spaces evolve

not only in the workplace; they can also be created in pedagogical programmes. If these programmes succeed in creating opportunities for people to be acknowledged as persons and increase their self-confidence, then they not only provide success in the labour market but also permit identity learning (see Salling Olesen, 2026). Liminal spaces for learning in work activities also encompass dimensions of personal development. Engagement with work activities and “knowing how to do things” triggers not only learning how to do things but also how to become and permanently be the person you are (or could be) and to be capable of ethical judgement (see Billett et al., 2026).

The three considerations – learning emerging biographically, being embedded in everyday life, and needing liminal spaces – emphasise that a narrow concept of learning cannot cover this phenomenon. Starting with the individual, who initiates learning processes by actively engaging with different contexts, learning extends throughout life and across different areas of life provided that the framework conditions are not too restrictive and allow for the emergence of liminal learning and development spaces. Conversely, biographical trajectories and diverse and sometimes changing contexts constantly stimulate the individual to learn, provided that they allow liminal spaces to emerge.

Contexts: relationships with institutions, organisations, and society

Although learning is a person-dependent process, it does not occur in isolation from a person’s social and physical environment. Instead, exploring learning at the nexus of life course, work, and transitions points to the significance of diverse contexts and their relationships with the learning subject. For instance, institutional regulations shape transitions in and out of work and educational settings and configure affordances for learning in ways associated with their norms, forms, and practices. Evolving organisational practices – such as those due to rapid technological change – affect opportunities and requirements for workplace learning. Broader societal contexts and imperatives situate learning politically, culturally and historically. So, rather than positioning contexts as static entities, the chapters in this book explore how these contexts themselves change, altering their complex relationships with the subject (e.g., working-age adults) and what this means for learning.

Learning is embedded in institutional contexts

Learning is a process that relates social structuring and personal agency as Petrik, Bernhard, and Niemeyer explain in their chapters. Their contributions draw attention to the connection between subjects’ learning and institutions, understood as established systems, explicit and implicit norms, and shared understandings within a society. Petrik (2026) explores university students’ learning not only within the university’s practices and rules but also beyond the institution. Focusing on the

changing relationship between work and learning in transitions to higher education, she points out that “the burden of managing the pressures of combining study and work increasingly falls on individuals rather than institutions”. This management becomes particularly problematic in a stratified education system where first-generation students encounter discrimination and barriers to access. Institutional action (e.g., programmes for professional development) or lack thereof shape work-related learning experiences and affect students’ ability to combine work and study. To better understand the complex relationship between a subject’s learning and institutional contexts, Bernhard (2026) proposes the concept of regimes as a “network of rules, norms and procedures”. Rather than mere deterministic entities, institutional contexts “shape affordances that invite individuals to engage and learn, particularly during work life transitions”. Niemeyer (2026) also explores this interplay among personal experiences, agency, and situated, sometimes contradictory institutional influences. Here, the concept of space-times of education is presented as a heuristic approach for transnational research on the connection between life course and work through “individual agency and structuring policies”. It refers to “such social sites where the nexus of life course, work and transitions is individually or collectively enacted”.

Learning is embedded in organisational contexts

Learning is further contextualised by engagement with organisations, particularly those in which adults work. In their chapters, Harteis and Marsick et al. explore the relationship between organisational change and the opportunities and demands on workers’ learning. Harteis (2026) shows how “digitised work environments establish structures that may widen as well as constrain workers’ scope of action”. A new quality of change in relationships between technologies and persons and, consequently, between work and learning, requires an “appropriate learning culture which provides material and immaterial resources for learning activities”. Similarly, and with a view of increased complexity, uncertainty, and need for agility in organisations, Marsick et al. (2026) discuss the shift from work-based learning to learning-based work. In a rapidly changing organisational context, employees are increasingly expected to bring to the workplace a passion for learning and a desire to experiment and to direct their own learning experiences. To support these self-directed learning experiences, however, there must be organisational change towards creating learning environments and providing learning-to-learn support. But employees’ learning experiences or “learning paths” in organisations such as workplaces do not necessarily match those pathways envisioned by those planning the learning, often the managers. From the perspective of learning-network theory, which posits that interdependent actors shape professional development in organisations, one can link “individual learning to the dynamics of the organisational context in which it takes place (and evolves)” (Poell et al., 2026). The agency of employees and the strategies they use

to forge their learning paths indicate that they engage with and sometimes even subvert organisational structures and processes.

Learning is embedded in societal contexts

Thirdly, learning is embedded in broader situational and societal contexts. This underscores a situational perspective which relates the learners' lifeworld – the subjective everyday world or “Lebenswelt” (Schütz & Luckmann, 2003) – with societal contexts. This becomes clear particularly in the chapters by Hoggan and Hoggan-Kloubert, Petrik, Niemeyer, and Lave et al. Their contributions stress the significance of learners' interactions within their situational and broader social environments. Exploring the potential for transformative learning during transitions, Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert (2026) argue that “when one is thrust into an unknown social system and experiences a dramatic change in social status and treatment”, one is required to learn and adapt to this entirely new set of social circumstances. Learning is thus a process driven by changes in context, in social status, and through social interactions. The significance of societal context is also apparent if the role of learners' recognition is accounted for as not only expressed through diplomas and certificates but also through other forms of social recognition (see Petrik, 2026)). Subjects are expected to conform to societal norms, and when they do not, recognition may be withheld. Learning can thus be seen as a “dynamic interplay of social processes of mis/recognition”. The granting or withholding of social recognition shapes social – and in the context of work, occupational – orders that change over time. This interplay points to the historically and culturally situated nature of learning and widens the lens of societal context both in terms of time and space (see Kraus, 2026; Thevenot, 2026). As Niemeyer underscores in her chapter, education and work are core categories of “socialisation” that are influenced by social change and historical transformation processes. To explore this wider framing of societal and historical situations, particularly in the context of transnational and “translingual” research, one can draw on the concept of space-times of adult education (see Niemeyer, 2026).

The situated and socially contextualised nature of learning is also at the centre of Lave et al.'s (2026) discussion of learning in everyday life. Learning can be understood as “changing participation in changing practices,” and people are “made of complex social relations as they move across the context of their lives”. These contexts do not merely prompt learning and adaptation in the sense of “societal changes affecting practices on the level of participants” but may themselves be changed through changing practices. Consequently, the dichotomy of individual and society is a false one that should be transcended by focusing on social practices and the situatedness and relationality of learning (see Lave et al., 2026; Salling Olesen, 2026).

Learning is thus shaped by the specific social, cultural, historical, and material contexts in which individuals act and interact. This perspective shifts from viewing

learning as a purely cognitive, internal, or intra-mental process divorced from what occurs beyond the skin. It also highlights the importance of the physical and brute environment, and social interaction. Learning is fundamentally embedded in social environments, shaped by interactions with them, and influenced by cultural norms and power dynamics. Specific institutional, organisational, social, cultural, historical, and material contexts are thus critical to how learning unfolds.

Qualities: positionality, translation, and relating knowledge and experience

Learning is a matter of positionality and subjectivity

The connections between people and the worlds they inhabit have long been a focus of intellectual and practical deliberation. Indeed, much of the discussion in continental philosophy up to and including Husserl was about identifying ways to bridge subject and object, seen as separate and in need of reconciliation. Heidegger changed the discussion by arguing that the need for bridging was irrelevant because individuals are born into or, to use his term, thrown into, the social world upon birth, immersed in it throughout their lives, and emerge from it only at their deaths. His concept of *Dasein* emphasises the notion of being enmeshed in the social world (Heidegger, 1900). So, rather than seeking to bridge the individual and the social world, he focused on the relations between both noting how, for instance, individuals came to engage inauthentically (i.e., against their values and beliefs) to conform to societal mores and imperatives, which meant that acting authentically (i.e., according to one's beliefs and values) often led to contestations with societal mores and practices. Beyond these philosophical perspectives, research on and theorising about human cognition and development, particularly in disciplines such as cultural psychology and anthropology, emphasise the interdependence of persons acting and the social worlds in which they act. Such disciplines seek to reconcile problems arising from systems of thought that emphasise either the individual (e.g., cognitive psychology) or the social (e.g., sociology). Pursuing reconciliation means proposing that there is nothing more social than the individual because individuals' development is shaped by and shapes the social world in which they think, act, and learn. Indeed, founding sociologist Durkheim proposed that individuals are social beings, as did Simmel, and more recently Harré (1984) emphasises that the individual is inherently social.

Contributions to this volume take up the matter of positionality (i.e., the relationality between the subject and the social) and associated accounts of subjectivity (how individuals see themselves); Salling Olesen (2026) describes how the status of occupations affected women's decision to take up paid work and the consequences of unemployment. This relationship with work was further complicated by the set of personal and societal values associated with being a mother, and the balance between caring for children and engaging in paid work and the worthiness

of that work. In this way, individual subjectivities are derived from a complex of relationships with the social world in which they act. Drawing upon Bronfenbrenner's accounting of different levels of social engagement, Hof (2026) rehearses Heidegger's *Dasein* by emphasising the process of becoming through engaging in situationally embedded practices "and the idea of understanding agency not as a person's characteristics but as a doing", thereby seeing individual participation as central not only to the process of becoming but also to what it means to be in the social world. Evident here are the kinds of negotiations or navigations that individuals participate in between the social and the personal. Kraus (2026) addresses the iterative nature of that process of engagement and learning through work activities and in work settings. Central to the relation between work and learning is how individuals come to experience and engage in those processes. More than just satisfying primary needs associated with livelihood, the engagement is also directed to creating and sustaining a sense of personal subjectivity, and to deciding how to engage with them in ways that permit further development of the capacities, interests, and values that are central to them.

The practical considerations here include those proposed by Poell et al. (2026) about how the search for ways to co-opt that engagement most effectively has been adopted by both management and by workers through consideration of learning paths. Differing from the orthodox approach to experiences as predetermined and pre-organised by the institution (schools, colleges, universities), new ways are shaped by the learners themselves in workplaces as professional development strategies. While pragmatic from both institutional and personal perspectives, such initiatives emphasise the dialogic quality of the relationships between people and the world they engage with.

Learning is about translation and transitions

While addressed indirectly in other contributions, Dinkelaker (2026) treats the translation of what individuals know, can do, and value to other situations and circumstances (i.e., learning), as imperative. Aligned with the concept of transfer, he makes the case that translating between social worlds is a key to extending learning across a working life. This includes negotiating boundaries between different social circumstances and practices. To support the transfer of knowledge from one circumstance to the other, he highlights the importance of processes that can navigate across social and situational boundaries, including those inside the boundaries and how they might influence the potential for crossing boundaries. These kinds of negotiations are emphasised in the three theoretical approaches to learning that are the focus for Billett, Kraus, and Sawchuk (2026): concepts about translating between the individual and the social. The three approaches arise from quite different cultural heritages: *Berufsbildung* (Germany), *Perezhivanie* (Russia), and *Phronesis* (Hellenic Greece), but all emphasise practical activities and interactions and note how these connect the individual to extant social dimensions. Through

their engagement in and interaction with the world, individuals accommodate or find their way around social expectations and requirements, and interact with others. They also respond to situational factors and receive feedback on their actions in terms of their outcomes and assessment of them, all of which is indicative of strong relations between the social and personal. In her individual contribution, Kraus (2026) emphasises the intersection of working and learning practices and transitions between them, showing that they are managed through the possession of technical knowledge and skills, individual approaches to work, and the kinds of transversal competences required to negotiate work practices. Hence, these contributions emphasise the negotiations that occur through individuals translating (transferring) what they have learnt to other circumstances and managing the transitions to other kinds of social practice.

Learning relates knowledge and experience

It is made evident throughout this volume that there are strong relationships among knowledge, knowing, and experience. Through experiencing (Billett et al., 2021; Dewey, 1938), the processes of knowing are central to how learning progresses. This means that what is afforded to individuals forms the basis on which they come to engage and learn. The contribution by Lave et al. (2026) emphasises the ubiquity of learning through everyday activities. However, Kraus (2026) notes that the kind of experiences that individuals have and learn from arise in distinct ways from different kinds of social practices because of their different norms, forms, and practices. What might be anticipated as being learnt in traditional education settings could be quite distinct from what is learnt in community or workplace settings. Another example of the relatedness of learning, knowing, and experience is exemplified in Salling Olesen's (2026) contribution about how knowing and experiencing shape learning processes, where he cites the example of someone who is unemployed and struggling to find a job that fits their interests and other imperatives. These three perspectives emphasise not only the social embeddedness of learning but also the links between social and personal contributions to knowledge that arise through negotiating and navigating those relationships. So, more than just social or personal agency, it is the relatedness and the negotiation that illustrate the importance of the relational aspects of the duality of personal and social.

Relationality as Key to Seeing Learning Differently – A Nexus

With an understanding of work, society, and transitions as elements of learning practices in a changing world, a move towards more dynamic, context-sensitive, and socially embedded understandings of how adults learn and develop across their lives is now warranted. Here, relationality is a key consideration. This is particularly pertinent in relation to work and to navigating various transitions in a complex and dramatically changing world (of work). Accordingly, in this book, learning

is not understood simply as an acquisition of knowledge. Moreover, it is seen as changes to practices, and the transformation of people in practice that is inherently situated, interdependent with, and relational to the broader social world. That is, transitions and learning are co-produced and shaped through interactions and relationships (Billett et al., 2021; Settersten Jr. et al., 2022). The contributions to this volume highlight the diversity of how learning arises within social relations and situated practices in everyday life, at work, and when crossing boundaries between different social contexts and processes. This underscores the close connection between a changing world and individuals living together in this world, where the social dimension of being an individual is fundamental.

Chapters in this volume also highlight the direct and indirect influence of institutional regulations and societal expectations on experiences and transitions – and thereby on learning. Social change, demands for sustainability, digital technologies, new forms of organising work and different ways of sequencing it, all require new forms of learning and affect the power relations among humans, organisations, and machines. The outcomes of empirical and theoretical research presented in this book indicate not only that learning is particularly salient during social change and personal transitions but also provide insights into the relationality of that learning.

From a relational perspective, normality emerges from the historical and institutional doing and undoing of social categories, suggestions from the social world, and the positioning of subjects within the learning landscape (Haraway, 1998). That positioning is evident, for instance, in the ascribing of responsibilities for lifelong learning or in making learning opportunities (un-)available. The idea of learning as a social practice, historically and culturally situated, reinforces the relational understanding of transitions as embedded in broader social contexts, because they are generated, developed, enacted, and revised and transformed by (social positioned) people in diverse and changing times.

In seeking to understand the relationship between the person acting and the circumstances in which they act and the consequences for learning and development, Billett (2002) identifies affordances – the invitational qualities of the social setting (i.e., the degree of guidance by others, situations, and artifacts) – on the one hand and individuals choosing to engage with what is afforded them, on the other. This duality is relevant to educational settings and programmes and interactions in communities as well as to workplaces. These affordances can be positive (i.e., welcoming invitations that provide support and guidance) or negative (i.e., rebuttals, being ignored, denied opportunities to engage). Individuals' interests in, willingness, and capacities to take up an invitation or navigate around negative affordances shape their participation and learning, albeit in person-dependent ways. All this emphasises the relational nature of this duality (Giddens, 1986). Individuals elect how to engage in and learn from educative experiences based on their readiness, interest, and agency (Billett et al., 2022, p. 423; Hof & Bernhard, 2025, p. 15).

It follows that understanding learning processes and outcomes requires consideration of the interplay between a person and broader social structures and processes that can facilitate or constrain opportunities for learning and development. This raises questions about the degree to which individuals can engage with the challenges and opportunities afforded to them. Continued research into adult learning at the nexus of life course, work, and transition should yield deeper conceptual insights into learning processes against the backdrop of rapidly changing contexts. These insights might also be used to identify, trial, and validate a range of educative experiences in educational, workplace, and community settings that can support work-life transitions – whether it is about sustaining current employment, advancing individuals’ capacities in a field, or moving on to a different occupation or career trajectory.

In combining the different strands of research discussed in this chapter and the others in this volume, the goal has been to reinterpret, reimagine, and reconceptualise the intersections of society, work, and transitions as learning in response to the complexities of the modern world where established rules and norms are constantly being upended by socio-cultural and political-economic changes. This necessitates rethinking education and educative experiences in order to equip individuals to navigate uncertain and rapidly evolving landscapes. It also includes the political aspiration to participate actively in shaping social conditions and economic modes of production.

Conceptualising learning as a relational process challenges traditional views of learning as solely an individualistic endeavour or as being confined to institutions of formal education. This perspective also challenges assumptions about formalised education as the primary means for learning across the lifespan, emphasising instead the significance of learning that occurs throughout adult life and primarily in everyday life, workplaces, and social interactions. The institutional and social conditions in all these areas can either support or hinder learning, depending on the positions of individuals in their societies and communities. From this perspective, the task is to create supportive learning environments for all beyond traditional education institutions.

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PART II

Societal Challenges



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4

ADULT LEARNING IN EVERYDAY LIFE

A Conversation About Social Relations and Situated Practices

Jean Lave, Christiane Hof, and Michael Bernhard

Introduction

Lifelong learning has mainly – especially in the so-called Western world – been understood as learning in formal settings. Therefore, learning is often seen as a reaction to teaching. Changes in work and society, as well as changes in individuals' biographical practices and expectations, have led to new perspectives on learning. Seeing lifelong learning differently means also being aware that research into learning must take place outside formal educational institutions and consider the relationships between individual engagement, social affordances, and learning opportunities. In other words, it raises questions about the relationships of which learning is a part.

Jean Lave began with ethnographic research on craft apprenticeship in Liberia in the 1970s, and a research project on everyday math practices in Southern California in the 1980s (Lave, 1988). With her student Etienne Wenger, she wrote *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (1991/2008), and her work since then has deepened the argument advanced in that book, that learning is embedded in complex relational dimensions. In this chapter, we consider this approach and argue that the further development of her thinking is crucial for discussing adult learning in changing times and for understanding learning at the nexus of life course, work, and transitions.

The chapter is organised as a conversation. This format allows us to present Lave's perspective on learning as a situated practice and relate it to the concept of this volume. Additionally, it gives us an opportunity to explore theoretical differences and commonalities in our different traditions of research: Learning in changing social practices on the one hand and learning in biographical transitions in the life course on the other.

Researching Learning as Part of Complex Social Relations

MB: Before we explore thematically specific questions, we would like to start with a broader question: How would you describe your own work as it connects with this idea of learning at the nexus of life course, work, and transitions?

JL: I've always been attracted to the notion that whatever you want to say about learning, it should be understood as part of complex social relations. Likewise, "persons" are made of complex social relations as they move across the context of their lives. And whatever goes on in one place, time, and activity, one context, is never made only in that context. It's a matter of relations among contexts.

A good question for us researchers is, in any particular case: Which relations across which persons, contexts, and practices are most important, in the researcher's judgement, for analysing what's going on?

As an anthropologist I value the complex affordances of ethnographic field research.

This intensive, long-term form of inquiry inevitably puts you in dialogue with yourself (as well as others) about your cultural assumptions and biases – making unfamiliar, remarkable, and problematic assumptions you aren't confronted with in the familiar contexts of life. For example, I went to West Africa in the 1970s, to conduct research that gradually turned into a project on craft apprenticeship. It was especially interesting because its history was not a Western tradition. It was not a form of schooling. Why did I do that? To give myself a chance to see more clearly and critically, hegemonic assumptions, beliefs, and prejudices about learning (including my own). I wanted to investigate learning processes and practices as they were happening as part of craft apprenticeship. We think of craft apprenticeship as involving masters who know what they're doing and apprentices who are there in order to become masters, tailors in the case of my project. But the process is not organised like schooling. Craft apprenticeship was one way to move away from school-like assumptions.

That ethnographic project was important as a step towards letting go of school-based hegemonic assumptions and practices about learning – recognising that those matter-of-fact "truths" are instead particular historical-political relations. I've always felt the need to stay away from research on schooling if I wanted to understand learning. Nonetheless, I've always argued that what comes out of research on everyday life, craft apprenticeship, etc., conceptually and analytically, is relevant for understanding the practices and processes of learners learning within schools as well.

CH: Do I understand correctly that your ethnographic approach to learning in communities of practice could be understood as research on learning beyond schools? But you deny describing this as non-formal learning because the concept of non-formal learning implies that learning in schools is the normal way of learning.

JL: Indeed, the notion of learning “beyond schooling” locates the research perspective in the philosophy and theory and practice of schooling. I have argued for years that the notion of formal, informal, and non-formal learning is a way of making hegemonic political, economic, and ideological distinctions as well as mostly invidious comparisons without critical empirical grounding. In *Situated Learning* (1991/2008), we talked about “communities of practice.” We were trying to address the question “If there are no ‘curriculum’ or ‘classes’, how do people learn in the midst of working together?” And it seemed that when people got caught up in projects, participating differently in complicated ways that, well, those were circumstances under which people would learn. Learning became possible as part of participating in the practice.

In other words, what you need for learning is co-participants who are differently engaged. To understand learning, you need to understand that there are others, differently involved in the practice, in different ways for different amounts of time, some more capable than others. In such heterogeneous contexts, learners have possibilities to roughly map out a course of what they’re going to, what they might experience, and what’s going to happen as they go along, and that’s useful for people learning. For instance, we had a notion that participants who were participating in different ways at different times in their biographies had different stakes with respect to their participation in an ongoing practice and communities of practice. So, if you were a central figure for many years in a particular practice, and along come newcomers, you want them to take part in the way you think the practice ought to be, because it matters to you – you have a stake in the practice as it is. The newcomers, on the other hand, both want to learn how to be and how to do what they’re there to learn to do – which has been created and generated by the people who came before – but at the same time they have a stake in changing things.

This can illustrate learning as participation in ongoing practices, and you can think of it in terms of social or intergenerational relations. When you take the intergenerational relations as constitutive of communities of practice, you must attend to the different stakes, tensions, conflicts, and difficulties and the powerful, rich resources they produce.

At the same time, there are many reasons why a community of practice should not be thought of as an empirical entity in the world or as a “community” in conventional terms! Normative assumptions about “community” assume that everybody is alike, they all get along with each other, they have shared values, the same purpose, and boundaries that separate them from everything else. This, unfortunately, would make it okay to talk about “a” community of practice.” In fact, the concept of community of practice was not intended to define or describe any kind of social group. It was plainly said in the *Situated Learning* book that this was an analytical question, not a thing. CoP is a way to say that “nexus” and practices

(or CoP) are ways of looking for interesting contexts of learning (as part of complex social relations).

MB: Thank you, this is a helpful explanation. With this, I'd like to return to your assumptions about learning.

Reflecting on Assumptions About Learning

JL: Among hegemonic notions about learning, perhaps the most common is the idea that learning is about knowledge acquisition. The concept of knowledge acquisition is an unreflective appeal to a set of relations of which learning is a crucial part. Together they reflect a conservative view of the world, by which learning is a mechanism for social reproduction. I have come to condense Western ideology to this mantra: K-T-I-T-A. First, what people are supposed to learn is Knowledge, which is to say pre-existing knowledge. Pre-existing knowledge has to have been created (somewhere else) by tradition, or senior knowers, or experts. Then, Teachers, who are not the producers of that knowledge, are supposed to transmit it to learners who are supposed to just Internalise it with verisimilitude. And then the learners are supposed to turn around and carry it away in their heads and go out into the world and Transfer it (that is the second T). And A is Apply it to problems in the world, turning the world into a set of problems to be solved. And all of this – every last one of those concepts, and their relations to each other – is subject to the kind of critique that we're making.

What are we critical of? Learning as knowledge acquisition is about the reproduction of canonical knowledge and culture (cultural anthropologists make this argument about cultural transmission and culture acquisition). That sees learning focused backwards, looking at the culture and knowledge that already exists. The questions that arise when learning is assumed to be about knowledge acquisition are “What knowledge?” and “Who hands it down?” More often than not, learning is just assumed, as an imperfect effect of teaching. There is no room in this notion of learning-as-social-reproduction for the dialectics of change, relations of past and future, or for social transformation.

Learning as changing participation in changing practices and in life course nexus and transformations

JL: And so, what instead? I always try to talk about persons changing in practice; first of all, learning is about change ontologically as part of a theory that builds on that beginning. In specific terms, change is about people changing their participation in changing ongoing practices as I have argued in *Learning and Everyday Life* (Lave, 2019). Those entities we conceive of (uncritically)

as “individuals” are embodied persons living in the world. It is very common to simply argue that they have minds, intentions, and process information. At universities, we have whole departments that argue in this way and focus only on mental processes. But we must recognise that this conception reduces irreducible historical-political-collective social-participatory practices to “mental exercise.”

CH: I agree with your critiques of learning research. Thus, the goal of our research has been to open up the discourse about and research into learning from formal or school-oriented perspectives. We started with the traditional idea of learning. The learning of the subject or the individual learning – understood as acquisition of new knowledge and perspectives. Then, we tried to see how we can relate to other individuals, social situations, and the societal dimensions of life. Against that background, the idea emerged that the individual has a life history or biography. And this was the reason to focus on the life course. Learners are embedded in their life history, as well as in particular life situations and social life conditions. This perspective, as you pointed out before, is grounded in a separation between the individual on one side and the society on the other side. And I understand that you try to overcome this separation by your concept of social practice, including situated learning.

Beyond the individual-society dichotomy

Beyond the individual-society dichotomy. But from our perspective that started with the individual learner; we were looking at the changes from the individual learner’s perspective. These changes we can see regarding the life course and particularly focusing on life course transitions.

MB: Looking at learning in the context of the life course and particularly focusing on life course transitions means that the individual learner is not isolated; they are embedded in a particular life situation. For example, someone is in the situation of starting a family or migrating. Those life course transitions are not individual they are framed by social norms and expectations. Therefore, the person’s way of coping with this transition depends not only on individual intentions and competencies but also on social affordances and expectations. Studying learning in life course transitions means considering and exploring precisely the nexus of individual learning and biographical changes in relation to discourses, institutions, other social actors and materialities (Hof & Bernhard, 2025; Stauber et al., 2022).

CH: In other words: we see transitions as social constructs. And they refer to normative ideas of the right time and the socially accepted way of doing particular things like marriage, having children, or starting work.

MB: Here, as with our earlier discussion on challenging the notion of “formal” and “schooling” as the reference points, we want to explore the ways in which individuals cope with those expectations and shape their lives. This means we

are interested in exploring learning in all its facets and places where it happens, including situations that can be described as transitions in the life course. After all, learning is an active process and not only a reaction to teaching.

CH: Hearing your explanations, I understand that we start research into learning from different assumptions and starting points. We understand learning as individual learning. And you understand it from the ethnographic perspective. I think you start from situations or practices.

JL: Your point is really important if we are to explore the interesting questions, I think we are beginning to address: What are the commonalities and differences of our approaches? And since every theoretical problematic is limited and partial with respect to what it does best, what are our strengths and limitations? For example, I thought (dialectical) relational analysis left your idea of nexus reproducing the separation of individual and social. But I'm learning from you that your concept of nexus is much more.

MB: Indeed, we don't think of it as a nexus between the social and the individual. Rather, we view it as a site where different phenomena – work, life course, transitions – intersect.

JL: I am struck by the different ways our work has been shaped by our refusal of deeply embedded dualist assumptions in the academy and the contemporary world at large – between individual and society, mind and body and many other “either . . . or”s. Your interest in a theoretical focus on the life course is a way to refuse to ratify the dualist construal of the world. It seems to me your approach to life course research is a relational analytic that refuses dualistic divisions and involves complex relations that go well beyond the person whose life course you're talking about. It has taken me many years to find my way into a dialectical relational theoretical perspective. For years I avoided talking about “the person,” “the subject,” for fear I would reproduce the same subject-world dualism that concerns you as well. It's hard work!

Relational Thinking

JL: I wanted to quickly go back to something you said about taking a relational approach to theorising. Perhaps the most important suggestion we are all making is to take relationality seriously. Because “the world” of our research inquiries is no longer seen as conveniently reducible to individual contexts. Learning happens through participation in changing practice. By participating in a practice, I change the practice. And that's inseparable from the world that is made up of relations of practice. In exploring learning in practice, one can take the inquiry in one direction to say, “How are certain societal changes affecting practices on the level of participants?” But that's really just one analytical focus. It matters also to analyse the effects of changing participation in changing practice in the world, including the world beyond current participants, participation and practices.

This reminds me of an example from the ethnographic research of Esther Goody, a British anthropologist who did fieldwork with village weavers in northern Ghana. I hope you like it too!

Esther's fieldwork was in a small village in which everyone was involved in weaving. Men were the main weavers. But men, women, and children, young and old, were involved in different aspects of the craft. Kids were bobbin boys. Many, perhaps especially women, were involved in carding, spinning and dying the wool. All of them, over generations, were peripheral participants in each other's work. Esther took one of the master weavers down to the capital, Accra, to see an exhibit of modern weaving technology. Maybe looms on display were more advanced than the looms in the village. They spent hours looking at the exhibit. Afterwards Esther asked the weaver what he thought about introducing such looms in the village. He was adamantly against it, he said, because the work of spinning, dying, preparing shuttles and looms, weaving, involved everyone in the village. Children and young people participated in the process as valued peripheral participants. Those helping the weavers could see what the weavers were doing and were always involved. The master weaver pointed out that their different ways of participating would disappear with new looms. And with that so would the young people, who would leave the village for the city. For the village to continue to be a village, it was crucial to sustain the practices they were engaged in.

So what is learning for? The work they were doing was a product of, and part of producing the village in a changing world. Part of what the young participants were doing was producing their futures. There must be a lot of that going on.

Theoretical Problematic Instead of Problematic Theories

JL: You know, as we're talking, I'm thinking that I don't talk about a theory of the "life course", or a "theory of learning." Rather, I think of these as parts of a broader theoretical problematic. I think that is probably to the advantage of folks like you and me who are trying to work towards alternative understandings of what might be going on in the world. To say that the theoretical problematic (including ontology, epistemology, theoretical assumptions, and empirical method), whether it's a dialectical, relational, historical, political one, or a phenomenological one, or whatever, is a complex set of assumptions about the world. It's a theory of the world and how people take part in it and how that world is made. And so, I don't think I'm a learning theorist. I'm a dialectical, relational theorist, and I'm interested in historical-political analysis of how people learn in their participation in ongoing, changing practice.

MB: That's interesting because as you set out to do your work, you took apprenticeship as a site where that crystallises, or where that can be started. But if I understand you correctly, you take this as a site of practice and approach it as broadly and as open-endedly as possible instead of limiting attention to buildings that have "school" written on them.

- JL:* Yes! If you argue that learning is a relation of change, one that is part of everything else in the world, then it raises a very important social-political-ethical question: What is learning for? And what is our research on learning for? On what grounds do we decide that some kinds of practices of learning change the world in ways that matter; ways that are so important they are worth devoting your life to understanding. These are really two questions: “what is learning for?” in the lives of people whose lives you study, and then the same question for the researcher about their research.
- CH:* And it’s interesting how you describe the evolving understanding of situatedness. Firstly, you acknowledge that the learning is not in the person’s head. It is situated by configurations. And secondly, your perspective and questions change as you recognise that it’s all politically situated. Yes, it’s historically situated and culturally situated; it brings into view many more facets that, depending on one’s interest, one may or may not consider. But I would, and correct me if I’m wrong, understand it’s still the same premise – that the situatedness takes into account more than what’s happening at the moment when I look at the learners
- JL:* What you are saying now about situatedness is a very useful clarification. It helps to explain how the way we think about situatedness has methodological consequences. Take learning in schools for instance: I don’t think we know very much about how learning happens in school. We know a lot about teaching and administration and curriculum, but what do we know about learning? And I believe that however learning happens, it happens just like it happens for learners learning everywhere else. There are people, learners are involved in changing practices of learning in whatever context they happen to find themselves in, and then the question is how do you describe and analyse those contexts?
- MB:* The starting point is that learning takes place in schools and in everyday life.
- JL:* But could we turn that around to say learning takes place in everyday life, of which schooling is sometimes a part – a part that needs careful analysis because its ideological importance masks a host of highly variable consequences in the everyday lives of persons learning. I’d like to ask you about your perspective on concepts such as “context“, “situation” and “experience” in life course work. Are these ideas central to life course research? Are other ways of talking about the life course more important? I’m still curious about how these differ in your work.
- MB:* Biographical research supposes that biography is about recalling the experience of life course events, and in educational sciences in Germany and Europe, perhaps researchers are interested in reconstructing the experiences and, therefore, the person’s development. This means they start with the idea of the subject and individual development and use biographical narratives to analyse the individual’s development within their life course and life situations. In doing so, they analyse individual interpretations of the life course and

include the life situations as frames of reference. In other words, biographical researchers assume to see both the course of life events, the individual interpretations of these events, and the social situation in which life is embedded.

Learning in Hegemonic and Counter-Hegemonic Practices

CH: Perhaps we could take up the question of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practices and how they relate to learning. Can we imagine any social practices that could be understood as counter-hegemonic and dis-alienating, and offering landscapes of better learning possibilities?

JL: Drawing on a concept of “situated learning” these days is intended to make clear that learning is a part of everything going on in the world and not a thing that’s separate from the world we inhabit and of which we are part. What “world” is that? In the dialectical relational theoretical problematic of Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Henri Lefebvre, and many others, this is a world deeply, historically structured as a capitalist hegemony. That is, it is a world engaged – hegemonically engaged – in reproducing capitalism in its current and changing forms. It organises and saturates our lives and learning.

So, when I want to inquire into learning-in-practice in the world, drawing on the rich theoretical and empirical field of critical accounts of hegemony is one good way of insisting that your analysis of learning expresses it as part of hegemonic relations. It is to insist that learning is a historical, political phenomenon, and that learning is part of struggles going on in our world which we need to take into account if we want to understand learning practices in particular circumstances. So, however you constitute that description of hegemony, it confronts us with questions about the ways in which the situated, conflictual struggles of learners-in-practice are hegemonic struggles. For instance, if capitalist hegemony with its enormous, institutionalised powers, practices, ideology, force, and influence is intended as a historical-political struggle of bourgeois society to reproduce itself, then how are those who are not the intended beneficiaries caught up in hegemonic struggles? These are questions about the situated character of relations of learning.

Gramsci and Lefebvre characterised and developed their ideas about hegemony in ways that look quite different on first acquaintance. Both grew out of Marx’s theory of alienation; his theory of alienation is the theory of the reproduction of capital. Marx’s essay “Estranged Labour” in the 1844 manuscripts describes alienation in the practices of production, wage labour, the division between labour and capital, and the alienated character of labour under capitalism. It can be read as an extraordinary analysis of situated practice and everyday life. Lefebvre took everyday life as the totality of which all this stuff is a part. For Lefebvre, hegemony is the struggle over alienation sustained through the domination of capitalist institutions in an alienated world. He looks at those processes at the level at which participants engage in everyday practice.

The work of inquiring into and analysing practices of learning employing Gramscian notions of hegemony involves a different approach from Lefebvre's. Gramscian conversation about hegemony (and thus counter-hegemonic practices and anti-hegemonic practices) at one level and the conversation about alienation and possibilities for dis-alienated practice in the everyday world (Lefebvre's way of once again taking Marxist ideas about the nature of hegemony) are two brilliant ways to make the historical, political, economic, cultural, social, ideological world analytically accessible for folks like us.

JL: In exploring the Production School movement in Denmark, I have been trying to analyse questions of personal political transformation and changes, in practice, in contradictory relations of alienation in Lefebvre's terms (Lave, 2026). But Gramsci's conception of relations between hegemony, counter-hegemony, and anti-hegemony also generates analytic questions when we explore the tensions between the production schools and the Danish Ministry of Education. Gramsci argues that it is the work of organic intellectuals to recognise, among shared, conventional beliefs, practices, etc., alternative (counter-hegemonic) strands of thought, transformative understandings of the world that express possibilities for change. Gramsci's argument seems to me deeply interesting but also confined to a primarily intellectual level. What about alternative practices and projects that embody ideas-in-practice in projects that generate, sustain and develop them? The production schools in Denmark operated on principles and with ideas about what were the real issues of the young people, what they wanted to do about it, and what they thought the outcome should be: open-ended changes to the grasp these young people have of their own future possibilities. I saw in the production schools a complex set of practices that generated a serious alternative to standard conventional, dominant institutionalised educational practices. After all, counter-hegemonic ideas and practices are in the long run more threatening to conventional hegemonic practices than mere opposition to the status quo. The latter (call it anti-hegemonic) affirms the given ideological and institutional "agenda," struggling against it without challenging its principles.

Counter-hegemonic projects obviously have alternative theoretical premises. I think those devising the production schools were working with an alternative to hegemonic, conventional theory of learning (knowledge acquisition, teachers, curriculum), for instance. What I found interesting in the production schools in the first place was the similarity of their understanding of learning to the theory of learning that we've been talking about: that learning is a matter of changing participants, changing participation in ongoing changing practice with others. The theory/practice of the production schools was produced in practice, and as intended, it developed and changed over time. That is part of what made it so interesting.

Counter-hegemonic projects may not be directly oppositional, but they are likely to be subversive of the hegemonic order. We live in a hegemonic arena where conventional distinctions are drawn between learning in school and the rest of life, assumptions that are reified and defended in a mantra of “formal/informal/nonformal” and – even more unacceptable – “wild learning.” These are historical political abstractions, class-based and colonial distinctions that designate where authority, legitimacy, access, value, and consequences for learners learning lie. They are hegemonic distinctions that organise fates and possibilities for citizens of different classes and categories, but only masquerade, conveniently, as a theory of learning. For learners – that’s all of us – it surely matters for our access to and possibilities of engagement in our own learning practices how we are treated and the meaning and the value conventionally assigned to our learning practices.

Hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practices (and their basic assumptions, priorities, and goals) are incommensurate, almost by definition. It is difficult to explain alternative practices, especially to those whose practices they differ from. There are translation problems; it is hard for proponents of each to explain their practices to the other. The result is tension, misunderstanding, and struggle to preserve or erase the differences.

Different Perspectives on Learning

MB: To follow up on this last point: the political, historical situatedness of learning plays out at the level of everyday practice. So the hegemonic practice of learning-as-changing-participation is occurring all the time. And there are sometimes counter-hegemonic developments in which processes of changing participation in changing practice are alternatively organised in counter-hegemonic ways. I’d like to explore these contradictions that we’ve been talking about as constitutive of a counter-hegemonic project on hegemonic terrain.

CH: Perhaps there are different perspectives from which to look at learning. You, from your social anthropology perspective, look at the world and how it is and ask, “What relations do I find and how is learning working there?” or “What is learning in this world?” And if we look at the young people who are joining the production school, they have experiences from before they came there. They have experiences with traditional school and its divisions in which the teachers have all the knowledge, and the learners are the insignificant people who know nothing and who receive bad grades. In this way, they repeatedly experience alienation. And then they come to this production school, and there is another kind of world, and they can have other experiences. They work together, learning how to make things, and these experiences create new meanings for the young people. I think we could look at learning situations or situations we live in and try to reconstruct what kind of experiences, what kind of learning, and what kind of feelings of alienation or disalienation are possible in this world.

JL: That sounds good to me and generates interesting research questions. Dis-alienation is never just a thing in itself. It's in relation to the alienation in people's lives, past and present, as you are suggesting. I was looking at alienation in political-economic, historical terms and at disalienation in similar terms in the production schools. I tried to explore a notion of personal political transformation as a possibility by the end of young people's participation in the production school. This seems in a very small way to move towards what I think you are doing. I'd really like you to say more about how the life world, life trajectory approach provides a deeper look at those experiences of people in practice individually. What do you think?

MB: Earlier, we talked about the problem of fixing the subject or the person. I said that biographical researchers do not start with the idea of an autonomous subject but start with the person and are interested to see how they live their life. This implies that they respect life situations with all their material conditions and constraints, normative expectations, and social requirements. In contrast to the traditional philosophy of the subject, we try to consider the dialectic relationship between the person and the world they live in. Learning is understood as the person's process of relating to the social world and the result of this process. However, our research includes the analysis of the social space and the social practices which support or hinder learning.

JL: Your focus on dialectical relations of person and world, social space, and contradictory effects of social practice – those are deeply shared commitments. That makes our differences seem complementary and useful to me! There are differences in the scope and kind of issues and questions that we usually address in our different research traditions. You have a strong focus theoretically and methodologically on a person's changing life trajectory, and trace moments of major changes in the experiences most significant to individual persons in their lives. I focus on participants and their changing access, participation, and cross-contextual relations of change in everyday practices with others. But one of the big revelations of our long conversation is the discovery that our reasons for approaching research as we do have been remarkably similar!

CH: At a different time, you said that you and your colleague Ray McDermott took Marx's essay on *Estranged Labour* and substituted "learning" for "labour" (Lave & McDermott, 2002). I was reading this book and the other about the production school. I haven't read all of Marx, but I remember we were talking about labour. And labour, is it doing labour? Just labouring. You produce any product, and you are produced yourself. In the process you produce use value. I think this is perhaps the problem you dealt with in this paper, describing this dialectical process. I produce something, and I am produced in doing so. And perhaps we have two possibilities. Two and more possibilities. We can start with the person and how they are going. We can start with the world and the structured world and what it means for the person. We need both.

JL: That's a great way to sum up our different approaches: they are the same project coming from different ends. How to understand persons and world – not as a binary division but as constitutive of each other. Yes! I like that way of thinking about the connections between our ways of doing things.

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5

EDUCATION CHALLENGES ARISING FROM THE DIGITALISATION OF WORK

Christian Harteis

Changes in the Organisation and Arrangement of Work

Technical innovations have always influenced the ways in which individual labour as well as industrial work have been organised and arranged. Hence, transformations to the characteristics of work are inevitable, as are the challenges they create. During periods of concrete transformation, they have often been greeted ambivalently or critically, but in the long run, many technical innovations have greatly improved working conditions (Barley et al., 2017). These days, digital tools spare humans the precise planning of sequential work steps and enhance the development of ideas within networks. Recent and ongoing digital changes raise questions of what is new in the quality of these changes and what possible consequences may arise from them for workers. This chapter explores how digitalised work environments establish structures that may widen and or constrain workers' scope of action. From an education perspective, particular questions about workers' experiences of competence, sense making, emancipation, and self-actualisation should be raised and possible solutions for eventual problems sought if (paid) work is not to be regarded simply or only as exploitation and self-alienation (Billett, 2021). All these issues touch on Vocational Education and Training (VET), adult and further education, and lifelong learning, all of which aim to prepare individuals to acquire the sometimes unforeseeable skills that will be required for future work. Simultaneously, they challenge learning sciences if learning needs are to be interpreted in new ways in a digitalised world.

Technological inventions

While the digital transformation of work and life has become a major topic in scientific and public discourses, technological and organisational change has a

similarly long history to the systematic (re)arrangement of industrial work. It is not at all novel that inventions find application in work environments, whether they be technological or related to how work is managed. Probably the most important invention for the development of work (and life in general) was the development of the wheel around 5,000 years ago, which allowed the transportation of goods and people far more efficiently than before. The effects were expansive, since it widened the potential range for travel and exploration. Exchanges of people and goods thus proliferated beyond communities to regions, countries, and then continents, with manifold consequences. At first glance, this new wheel might have relieved the working lives of those who previously had transported with their muscle power. In the long run, wheels enabled the operation of machines and gears which were later developed into drivers for technology and industrial production. The following discussion refers to developments in the Western world, whereas there are indicators that mass production, that is, an obviously technology-based production of artefacts, was established in Far East Asia before the Common Era (Billett, 2014).

A sequence of industrial revolutions changed how industrial work was organised (see e.g., Wilkens, 2020). During the 18th century, the discovery of steam power led to the development of engines and machines – the first industrial revolution. The first steam-driven production machine was built in 1784 in England, replacing hand-driven looms and greatly increasing textile production capacity. About 20 years later, steam locomotives increased their capacities for the transportation of goods and people. Where the wheel had replaced human body power, the steam engine relieved the lives of the horses that were the usual mode of transport at the time. The second revolution followed in 1870 with the development of devices powered by electricity, which was crucial for mass production. The first electric conveyor belt is supposed to have been used in the Cincinnati slaughterhouse. From then on, it was possible to organise work with a high degree of division of labour, later systematically described by Frederick Taylor (1911). Perhaps the first popular mass product was Henry Ford's T-model (Tin Lizzy), produced in great numbers between 1908 and 1927. The central idea of such work organisation was to split work steps into small tasks that were easy to fulfil and easy to learn. Production has since become even more efficient and less physically demanding. The third revolution was the integration of programmable logic controllers for IT and electronic systems in 1969. This was when digital technology was first applied in industry, leading to further automation, replacing human work on an operational level but simultaneously increasing the number of steering and monitoring tasks. The fourth industrial revolution involved the integration of cyber-physical systems into work organisation (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2016). Cyber-physical systems comprise humans, mechanic parts, and computers –all of them communicating autonomously via the internet. The innovation here is that it is no longer only humans communicating among themselves, but also the technical components – computers via their software, and mechanical parts via sensors and switches (Fischer et al., 2018). Hence the relationships between humans and technology change.

Managerial innovations

The 20th century brought not only such technological innovations but also changes in ideas about how best to organise work. Taylor's notion of scientific management (Taylor, 1911) encouraged new ideas about work organisation, and in 1920, Ford established mass production. Both Taylorism and Fordism have had a bad reputation, in part because they were misinterpreted in some details (Womack et al., 2007). Taylor's idea was not only to organise work more efficiently but also to organise it in ways that allowed workers to recover. Ford's core idea was not the assembly line, as has often been thought, but to organise work in a way that makes each worker easily interchangeable. As designed by Ford, work tasks on assembly lines required no preparation, could be learnt quickly and by anybody. Forms of work organisation were established that treated workers and machines as interchangeable, with each work step following a strict protocol, and the combination of these protocols culminating in the final product. This kind of thinking about work organisation implied that work processes could be directed even by Mickey Mouse, as the former ITT CEO Harold Green once stated (Harteis & Gruber, 2004).

When the potential for growth through automation was exhausted, European and North American managers looked to Japan which had had a big growth spurt in the 1980s, in particular in the car industry, and increasing economic success in Europe. This led to a break with Taylorist production processes by gradually introducing degrees of freedom for workers, and concepts like *business process reengineering* or *lean organisation* became leading organisational principles. The main idea was that an organisation need not necessarily cover all tasks itself, but rather, can out-source those not at the core of its main business activity. The remaining tasks were redistributed in a way that is best described as job enrichment, because this way, even those employees who at the time held purely executive positions took up disposal and planning tasks (Harteis & Gruber, 2004). Middle management staff thus became dispensable, since their supervision work was no longer required. Simultaneously, continuous improvement processes were implemented, and employees were requested to report for improvement. With such a switch of approach, the value of individual employees and their skills became important. A further step followed the idea of outsourcing, and concepts like the *boundless enterprise* (Picot et al., 2023) were developed – understood as an organisation bound into an inter-related network of companies. The focus of work organisation was no longer only on the inside of a firm, but also faced towards the outside, with customer relations as an essential component. From a radical point of view, these concepts can be read as an arrangement of interfaces represented by employees of different organisations. As such, the employees play a crucial role, and job demands go beyond job enrichment, because employees are requested to react spontaneously and flexibly to requirements. Consequently, the idea of *learning organisations* (Argyris, 1996; Senge, 2006) was established, implying permanent change and employee capacities to cope with that change.

To summarise the first part of the argument, on the levels of both technology and management theory, a kind of parallel development can be observed. Firms developed away from exact process planning, and the separation between planning and operation moved instead towards networks with interfaces, so far represented by human employees. They are no longer considered interchangeable production units but individuals with crucial skills and experiences. The key aspect here is the question of the quality of the changes arising from recent digital transformation and their consequences for the role of humans in work.

The Novel Changes in Digital Transformations

This section first discusses the new character of changes and consequences for human work, from three perspectives, namely the increase in complexity, the increase in speed, and the shift to internet-based work organisation. Second, it addresses the consequences for the role of humans.

Changes through digital transformation

Through all the developments discussed in the above section, ways of organising work and skill requirements became more and more complex. As soon as linear divisions of labour were abandoned, the clarity of work processes disappeared and options for the combination of orders and tasks increased. With the combining of machines, digital devices, and humans, the possible direct and side-effects of any action within a system become difficult to predict (Billett, 2021). Such combinations of tools and machines establish interdependent systems with non-transparent interrelations, which then demand a tolerance for ambiguity (Fuchs, 2014).

The speed of technological change has accelerated dramatically during the last few decades. A good indicator is the proliferation of technology in daily life and in industrial application. Early important analogue innovations, such as the telephone and television, reveal a quite flat curve of inclination. Many years passed from invention to mass use of it. Colour television began to be commercialised in 1966, and it was 25 years before 80% of US households had one at home; the cell-phone was introduced to the market in 1995 and then took just 14 years to reach the same level of proliferation (Comin & Hobijn, 2010). The adoption of digital devices is much more accelerated, and a reference point for judging its speed is the time in years until they reach 100 million users worldwide: the World Wide Web, established in 1990, took seven years, Facebook (2004) 4.4 years, and Instagram (2019) 2.2 years (Statista, 2024). AI applications like ChatGPT simply explode these figures: it was released in November 2021, and just one year later, it had 1.2 trillion users per month (Statista, 2024). Several forecasts of future developments describe technological change no longer as linear or exponential but as disruptive – meaning that breaking inventions will boost development in huge steps – as ChatGPT did.

Consequences for the role of humans

During the 20th century, the roles of workers and employees in industrial production changed from individuals being considered unimportant, interchangeable, to individual skills and experiences being valued. As the digital transformation has just begun, the consequences for the role of humans are not yet clear. The literature discusses two major possible scenarios:

- *The Replacement scenario.* In a widely read paper, Carl Frey and Michael Osborne (2017) judge the risks of various occupational categories of being completely replaced by digital technology. They consider that the occupations with a high degree of routine tasks are at great risk of replacement. Those occupations are to be found not only in industry but also in business administration. Care work, educational occupations, and human-centred services, in contrast, seem to be relatively safe from replacement by digital devices.
- *Tooling scenario.* Andrew McAfee and Erik Brynjolfsson (2017) argue that digital devices can enlarge human capabilities. Digital tools enable a single person to monitor an entire production hall equipped with robots, even from a remote position. That provides widened opportunities for arranging work-life. Exoskeletons can assist care workers in handling patients and, thus, improve ergonomics and the health of care workers.

The replacement scenario can be discussed in a similar way to the first industrial revolutions. Two kinds of jobs will not be replaced: high-skilled jobs which cannot (yet) be replaced because of their complex profiles (e.g., involving creative tasks, ethical judgements, management decisions), and simple tasks that would be expensive to replace with digital machinery. In this sense, we might presume a return to the historic separation between planning and executing tasks. However, job replacement may be desirable due to skills shortages on the one hand and the disappearance of boring or even unhealthy jobs on the other hand. Finally, there is a kind of agreement in the literature (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2016) that both scenarios will become reality and that industrial and service enterprises as well as workers and employees will (have to) arrange with a variety of digital saturation.

A kind of development which is currently to be realised in the organisation of work combines cyber-physical systems with human work – labelled as industry 4.0 or the internet of things. As described earlier, in such a setting, digital devices, mechanical machines, and humans interact with each other autonomously. Technically, such arrangements require a digital copy of the real-world scenario in which all components of the real world (machines as well as humans) find a digital representation – called a digital twin – that represents the interface between a human or other component and the system. Each intervention in this setting occurs on the level of the digital twins, which then send signals to the real-world components. The roles of humans here are determined (and constrained) by their digital twins within the digital copy of the real-world setting (Berisha-Gawlowski et al., 2021).

Whereas technical specifications can be described precisely and comprehensively, it is impossible to represent digitally a human as a complete individual (Ötting et al., 2022). Hence, it is the probably implicit anthropology of system developers that decides on the quality of human representation within digital settings. A variety of educational challenges accrue.

Educational Challenges

The focus of public debate about digital transformation is usually dictated by technological domains (e.g., software engineering, robotics) or business domains (e.g., business management, work science). But the digital transformation raises challenges not only in these domains but also for education science.

In its philosophical roots, individual autonomy is considered a major goal of education. Autonomy here means independence from external forces, because an individual has the right to decide about action based on their individual needs and preferences. This approach goes back to Emmanuel Kant (1999), who established that a core goal of education is to encourage individuals to make use of their own understanding without direction from others. In a digital work environment (industry 4.0), the network and its interfaces constrain individual autonomy. Digital twins are represented in a limited number of selected variables with fixed values. From an educational point of view, the question arises as to how appropriate the design of digital twins is for providing employees with a kind of autonomy in their working lives.

A further key goal of education has been the integration of an individual into a social community on the basis of insight into and agreement with social rules (Dewey, 1966). The integration into a work community serves a psychological need (Ryan & Deci, 2006) and enhances the development of a work identity that can be an important part of an individual's identity. However, digital work environments enable remote interactions, and, thus, experience of a social environment is at least partly mediated by digital tools. There is empirical evidence already from the early days of media education that individuals experience mediated interaction in different ways from direct interaction. Additionally, AI provides the possibility of concealing input from digital devices and faking human conversation and interaction. Studies reveal that humans prefer interaction with, including taking orders from, humans, but in experiments, people did not perform well in distinguishing between human and AI-based interaction (Ötting & Maier, 2018).

The digital transformation may establish work environments that are non-transparent – particularly in remote work – and conceal decision making as soon as tools and machines operate on the basis of (hidden) algorithms. In such circumstances, it is almost impossible for individuals to have an overview of the system and to develop a mature understanding of the work environment and finally to reach either autonomy or social integration. An example of such work conditions is the distribution of orders to Uber workers, which does not follow a transparent rationality (e.g., proximity of disposability) but a hidden one, because those drivers

are prioritised who make the highest profit for the Uber company. This is a danger of prioritising machines over humans in such constellations.

On the more concrete level of work practices, it is obvious that digital transformations change work environments and the way that employees interact. This has consequences for informal workplace learning, which crucially depends on individual interpretations of the environment and socio-material influences and suggestions (Billett, 2001; Rausch, 2010). As prior knowledge, understanding, and learning culture are important precursors for workplace learning (Harteis et al., 2020), the digital transformation might withdraw the bases for workplace learning; for example, if prior knowledge is no longer helpful, digitally mediated interaction suppresses important nonverbal communication, or if the learning culture is strongly oriented to personal, direct interactions. As experiences from the Covid-19 pandemic reveal, digital video conferences significantly broadened the scope of remote participation, but at the same time, the quality of interaction decreased (Bennett et al., 2021). At this point, the question returns as to how digitally mediated interaction and work practices differ from those where employees are physically present. Again, it is the shape of interfaces in digital environments that determines opportunities and limitations for workplace learning because they determine the scope of human input into the system. As research into workplace learning opportunities in un-digitalised work environments reveals, a Matthew effect can be observed: those in privileged positions (with better jobs, better education, more prior knowledge) receive much better opportunities for workplace learning than underprivileged employees (Harteis et al., 2015). It is not unlikely that the digital transformation will generate a digital divide that intensifies workplace learning opportunity inequalities.

Digitally mediated work might also reveal changes that are widely referred to as the ironies of technological evolution. An early effect of the appearance of telephones with number storage capacities was that people no longer needed to remember them. Many people these days are simply untrained in memorising telephone numbers. This is not terribly important, because digital memories assist. Similarly, the proliferation of navigation systems in cars has meant that people are no longer required to read maps, and many people are now simply unable to make use of paper maps. This kind of un-learning might have wider effects, but still, mobile telephones with their navigation apps assist widely here. However, there is an example from VET in which digital tools have created serious side effects. It was a significant progress when lathes and millers were equipped with computer-controlled guidance because this invention increased job speed and precision. Hence, CNC machines (computer numerical control) were implemented in apprenticeships and VET. One important effect, however, was that those apprentices who were only trained with CNC machines lost a sense for the work material, its texture, and robustness (Martin & Scribner, 1991). Manual work is still considered crucial to the development of all aspects of skilled work. As the digital transformation is only in its early phase, we have yet to see what loss of crucial capabilities may occur.

A final issue to be discussed here touches on ethical issues around data privacy. Each input into a digital network leaves traces in the system memory. Well-established software packages for office tasks (e.g., Microsoft 365) enable employers to retrace logfiles and screen activities for every single digital device. Inquiries made on internet search machines deliver content and the computer's IP address to the tech companies which then use the data to further improve their systems. Whereas the majority of employees provide their private data generously and communicatively in their social networks, they might be concerned to know that their work data are distributed to other entities, albeit anonymous ones. Interactions, including physical ones, with a modern robot also record data, so that it is possible to identify a worker's actual condition after a few interactions, as soon as that robot has been trained to "know" an individual. This kind of data is recorded and stored in a database. These issues become crucial because a tendency to represent genetic and biographical data in an employee's digital twin has been observed, assuming some predictive power for work activities (Pilz et al., 2023). Here, not only ethical issues of data privacy arise but also legal ones which concern employee participation.

Vocational Education and Training and Workplace Learning

As discussed, the digital transformation changes work requirements and the interactions among humans as well as between humans and machines. Educational challenges have been discussed above; we now need to draw conclusions about how best to support employees and workers to be prepared for future changes. Two areas of work-related learning are of relevance here: VET and workplace learning.

VET

Dieter Euler (2018) discussed reference points of vocational education and training with regard to technology, particularly digital tools (see Table 5.1), because apprentices in VET experience their training not as separate from the rest of their living environment but as embedded in it.

TABLE 5.1 Reference points for VET (Euler, 2018).

<i>Technology as . . .</i>	<i>Application</i>	<i>Consequences</i>
. . . universal tool	Workers' daily life	E.g., communication, creativity, responsibility, reasoning power
. . . learning tool	VET	Technology-supported instructions
. . . working tool	Workplace requirements	Novel job profiles

Actors in VET need to be aware that the digital transformation changes not only VET learning environments but also apprentices' work and daily life environments. Hence, digital technology should be considered from three perspectives.

- *Universal tool.* Digital devices saturate our daily lives in manifold ways. A 2023 survey (Statista, 2024) revealed that 81% of the German population are represented in social media, and they use an average of 6.7 platforms per month for their communication as well as information gathering. These practices influence people's levels of information, the ways and extent to which they can participate in, and contribute to, society, and how they develop ideas and creativity. Though 19% of the German population is excluded from this picture, it is clear that teachers in VET need to consider that apprentices' daily lives are strongly shaped by digital devices.
- *Learning tool.* Already with the implementation of smartboards in classrooms, well-established routines of blackboard use became obsolete – and teachers got into trouble because they could no longer use that expertise (Berliner, 2019). A further, far-reaching innovation has been the idea of integrating the internet and digital devices into classes and most recently to make use of AI in classroom settings. At the level of school teaching (in VET), the digital transformation raises novel pedagogical requirements, for which teachers will have to be trained in order to be able to develop appropriate and fruitful pedagogical approaches.
- *Working tool.* As discussed earlier, the adoption of digital technology changes job requirements. An expeditor's task profile, e.g., dramatically changes if manual disposition tasks are taken over by a software programme. It is an open question whether dispositional capacities are still required, but in any case, the need to understand and to apply the software raises novel skills requirements. The extent of the changes in particular occupations will determine if and how far VET programmes and curricula need to be adopted or completely reshaped. Adaptation to technological change is nothing new for VET; for example, the car mechanic has been replaced by the car mechatronic since digital steering components have been widely introduced into regular cars.

A major problem for VET is that the development of curricula and occupational programmes is a long-term endeavour requiring a significant amount of time. It is highly likely, then, that at the moment a new programme starts, the frame conditions under which it was developed have already changed. For the development of curricula, it is important to acknowledge that the risk of obsolescence rises with the extent to which curricula target concrete (current) working conditions (Heid, 1999). This particularly applies to digitalised workplaces in which the socio-material environment becomes ambiguous due to an interconnectivity of machines and humans. And since developers of VET curricula cannot foresee future developments comprehensively, we must accept that formal education like VET curricula

should provide a solid general basis for working life, comprising domain-specific occupational foundations as well as generic skills such as self-directed learning. With such an orientation, VET can enable apprentices to do skilled work in their jobs and to cope with challenges that arise from changes in the workplaces, including from future digital transformation, through workplace learning.

Workplace learning

Workplace learning describes processes of informal learning when workers and employees accomplish their learning in the practice of their work tasks. As workplaces now usually provide a degree of freedom for acting, opportunities for learning arise. However, workers and employees require skills of self-regulation, now considered core competences in European education policy, which sees lifelong learning as a prerequisite for maintaining employability (Harteis & Goller, 2014; Halttunen et al., 2014). Workplace learning can serve two different purposes: firstly, to enable the simple accomplishment of work tasks without the need to understand the deeper context of the task (e.g., without seeking to know how to operate a machine); secondly, to enable the achievement of agency and sovereignty in work activities. From an educational point of view, as well as following an understanding of learning organisations, the second purpose seems more desirable because it aims to help individuals to make informed decisions and choices about their working lives and to enhance their emancipation from sometimes hidden constraints and influences at work, including those created by the digital transformation. Such an understanding appears in Richard De Charms' motivational approach which distinguishes between "origins" and "pawns" (De Charms, 1977). Pawns experience themselves as poorly self-effective at work and as objects in the work environment. Origins, by contrast, see themselves as highly effective and competent at work, with agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Goller, 2017), that is, performing skilled work and coping with changes on the basis of informed decisions and competent understanding. However, such high-quality workplace learning requires an appropriate learning culture – one that provides material and immaterial resources for learning activities (Schön & Argyris, 1996; Fischer et al., 2018). From the viewpoint of education theory, such workplace learning must aim at conceptual change if the digital transformation creates novel and complex structures in the work environment (Goller et al., 2021) and if workers are to gain or maintain control and self-direction in digitalised workplaces. As De Charms' (1977) experiment revealed, the development of a self-understanding as an origin requires appropriate socio-material support.

To understand the quality of digital transformation on workplace learning, a model originally developed by Ruben Puentedura (2006) and developed further by Karl-Heinz Gerholz and Markus Dormann (2017) is useful. It suggests an analytic distinction among work modalities: (a) *interaction* that occurs either face-to-face or mediated by digital devices, (b) *documentation* of completed or upcoming work

steps, (c) *execution* of work tasks, and (d) *planning* and *evaluation* of future work steps. Each of these modes can be affected by digital transformation in a particular way, for which Puentedura (2006) describes four (qualitatively differing) levels of coping: likewise, enhancement, reorganisation, and new design (the LEaRN model).

- *Likewise*. This level of coping describes handling work practices that were carried out in an analogue form but then are replaced by digital devices (e.g., paper documentation replaced by digital documentation). The workflow does not change significantly, and learning requirements are limited to software usage.
- *Enhancement*. At this level, digital devices reveal enriched work practices that did not exist in the analogue version (e.g., tools for videoconferencing). They widen the potential scope of tasks and workflows. Learning requirements comprise not only the software usage but also getting acquainted with possible modified work practices.
- *Reorganisation*. This level describes the implementation of work practices that can only be realised through digital devices. In digitalised work environments, operational activities are often replaced by monitoring tasks. A production process controlled by cyber-physical systems no longer operationalises activities on the production floor and only requires intervention in case of failures of the system, which needs to be monitored.
- *New design*. At this level, completely novel work practices emerge that can only be realised in the context of digital networks (e.g., crowdwork, virtual reality). In crowdwork, a distributed, skilled workforce can work collaboratively at problem solving; VR allows virtual simulation of processes and remote assistance through connection to an external expert. For this kind of work arrangement, a completely novel set of skills for receiving orders and fulfilling working tasks is required.

Gerholz and Dormann (2017) interpret the levels of *likewise* and *enhancement* as improvements in work conditions. There is no disruptive transformation and alteration of workflows and practices but, rather, addition of new issues. In contrast, in the cases of *reorganisation* and *new design*, changes to workflow and practices create radical changes which establish novel skill profiles and occupational rules, and are thus considered as transformation. This model can help us to analyse the consequences of digital transformation in concrete workplaces and to understand workers' learning needs. In the light of Lev Vygotsky's approach of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), it is crucial to reflect on the relationship between new affordances of digitalised workplaces on the one hand and an individual's self-regulated skills for developing new mental models on the other. As soon as individuals are overwhelmed by novel digitalised work practices due to a lack of skills and prior knowledge, external support in the form of guidance or formal training becomes necessary (Harteis et al., 2022).

Concluding Remarks

The digital transformation brings challenges for education research as well as for education practices. Because education systems differ internationally, the preconditions for preparing individuals for occupational requirements and workplace learning differ, too. As the digital transformation is at its beginning, systematic empirical findings do not yet exist. Affordances through digitalisation may vary across domains and workplaces, as the individual experiences of employees probably vary. Hence, exploratory studies of employees' reactions to digitalisation are needed, as well as experimental laboratory studies that investigate learning processes mediated by digital devices. Such studies will require interdisciplinary cooperation between educationalists and technology disciplines, for example, systems engineering, software engineering, robotics.

The development of digital devices also widens options for data gathering. There has been massive progress in sensors and measuring devices that allow process recording, e.g., eye-tracking glasses, bio-physical sensors, augmented and virtual reality devices. They may provide rich insight into individuals' reaction to digitalised environments. However, although the application of such measuring devices can be quite simple now, the problem of managing and interpreting such novel data remains, because there are newly designed datasets that have nothing in common with traditional methods of data collection, such as questionnaires, interviews, and observations. Perhaps novel education theories must be developed in order to understand fully the consequences of digital transformation.

The consequences of digital development for education practices have been observed since computers were introduced as learning tools. However, AI and digital devices such as mobile phones reveal requirements for further adaptation of school teaching and VET – for teaching purposes as well as for assessment. Previous digital innovations have not yet led to significant changes in the structures of school teaching and VET, but perhaps the coming digital revolutions will require fundamental changes here, particularly in light of OpenAI's 5-step vision for digital development, which considers ChatGPT at step one. This vision forecasts a level of AI that enables digital devices to overtake complete human capabilities, including in creativity and inventive genius. At that point, traditional education structures will probably be outdated.

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6

NAVIGATING COMPLEXITY AND THRIVING IN LIMINAL SPACES THROUGH LEARNING-BASED WORK

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Introduction

The world has grown increasingly complex, a development hastened by the disruptive reset provoked by the Covid-19 pandemic, the existential threat of climate change, increasing global interaction, and the eruption of generative AI. Stable, sometimes impenetrable, boundaries in siloed hierarchical human systems from earlier eras are blurring or shifting, as witnessed by a burgeoning literature on business and learning ecosystems (e.g., Barnett & Jackson, 2020). Long-held beliefs and action logics are being challenged, and new forms of organising for work and learning are being invented (e.g., Edmondson & Harvey, 2017; Lee & Edmondson, 2017). Power dynamics, too, are shifting as intelligent technologies rapidly change the present and the future of work.

In this chapter, we use a complexity lens to examine the shifting relationship between learning and work in various knowledge organisation settings. We are inspired by scholars who have adopted an ecosystems' framing of organisational life governed by dynamic self-organising systems (e.g., Pendleton-Jullian & Seely Brown, 2018; Barnett & Jackson, 2020). Our goal is to add clarity and dimension to learning-based work (LBW).

After introducing our perspective on complexity, we reprise distinctions we made in 2022 between work-based learning and learning-based work, most notably the idea that in a complex environment learning defines work rather than the other way around (Marsick et al., 2022). We introduce five core principles we see as central to LBW. We then use examples in organisations based on our own research (e.g., Watkins & Marsick, 2023) and practice to examine those principles and explore how complexity is reshaping the relationship between learning and work. Next, we link LBW to the idea of creating *permanent liminal spaces* for individual

or collective growth – drawing on the feature of complexity where innovation arises at and between the boundaries of interacting systems. In our conclusion, we position LBW as a framework for thriving in complexity within liminal learning spaces to produce innovation in the workplace. LBW invites us to experience work as a process of emergence and possibility rather than predictability. The Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (i.e.utm.edu) describes “emergence” as based on “the Latin verb *emergo* which means to arise, to rise up, to come forth.” In complex systems, emergence denotes effects that arise without having been planned, predicted, or calculated. We also discuss conditions for and potential barriers to LBW growth, given the legacy of command-and-control hierarchical structures and other assumptions about work that have dominated during the industrial era.

Focus on Complexity

While there are a number of lenses we could use to discuss the changing relationship between work and learning, we chose complexity because of its great influence on the nature of work and the “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973) it creates, especially in knowledge-intensive organisations. Found “in the transitional space between order and chaos” where “rules” (Pendleton-Jullian & Seely Brown, 2018, p. 45) are suspended, complexity forces us to reframe our “ways of learning and working, our ways of creating value, and imagining, innovating, and shaping our futures” (p. 28). Complexity stretches us into the “realm of the unknown unknowns,” as Snowden and Boone (2007) argued in their Cynefin Framework, a heuristic for complex decision making based on varying degrees of cause-and-effect unpredictability. For non-complex decisions, training or consultation can achieve the desired results. In such cases, “best” solutions exist because there are few if any unknown unknowns. The complexity and chaos categories, in contrast, call for learning new strategies that involve experimentation and innovative thinking that explore alternative plausible options. Pendleton-Jullian and Seely Brown (2018) further envision the complex world as emergent, entwined ecosystems in which people and systems are constantly adapting and co-evolving with no clear outcome other than future potential. Work ecosystems are driven by “collaboration in a contingent context; evolution and resiliency that are dependent upon chance and novel perturbations; and propensities rather than causal processes or fixed laws” (p. 37).

As “dynamical systems composed of sets of interconnected elements . . . that change and evolve over time as they interact with each other” (Coleman et al., 2017, p. 182), organisations are not immune to complexity. Changes in one part of a work ecosystem can have unexpected impacts in distant parts of the broader system. Rather than attempting to control systems by compartmentalising work and learning, the goal is to “(1) alter the boundaries of the system, influencing the scope and constraints of the system; and (2) introduce ‘probes’ to ‘audit the system as it is changing; or (3) ‘create

modulators’ that can influence changes in the system” (Pendleton-Jullian & Seely Brown, 2018, p. 48, cited in Watkins & Marsick, 2023, p. 3). In other words, while complex problems do not have *right* answers, solutions “*can be worked on*” (p. 48, italics in original). A simple illustration is how hackers and programmers exploit glitches in computer games to create modifications that let them temporarily work outside the algorithms that govern the rules of the game (Qi, 2023). Their creations may win them competitive advantage while also evolving the game.

Since the very nature of complexity makes it impossible for individuals to see—let alone modulate—all aspects of context, knowledge-intensive work becomes a collective exploration, one that acknowledges the importance of being able to access diverse networks and perspectives. In complex environments, “rich networks of relationships” (Hagel et al., 2010, p. 15) and “locally networked system members with heterogeneous weak ties to outside systems” (Rogers et al., 2005, p.4) form the basis for problem-solving and innovation. This holistic perspective also calls for a shift away from hierarchical decision making in organisations toward a collective approach.

From work-based learning to learning-based work

We first wrote about learning-based work in 2022 while examining the relationship between work and learning. We observed an increasingly dynamic interplay between the two, driven largely by a fast-changing, AI-enhanced work environment. We described LBW as “work that privileges learning in order to build individual and organisational capacity to better address emergent challenges or opportunities” (Marsick et al., 2022, p. 177). We identified five shifts (see Figure 6.1), “based on degrees and types of separation or integration between work and learning—in time, space, and role” (p. 177).

We also introduced a distinction between work-based learning (WBL) and LBW. We understand WBL as performance-focused capacity development to achieve explicit goals by integrating learning into real or simulated tasks and challenges. This presupposes the existence of time-tested best practices and knowledge of

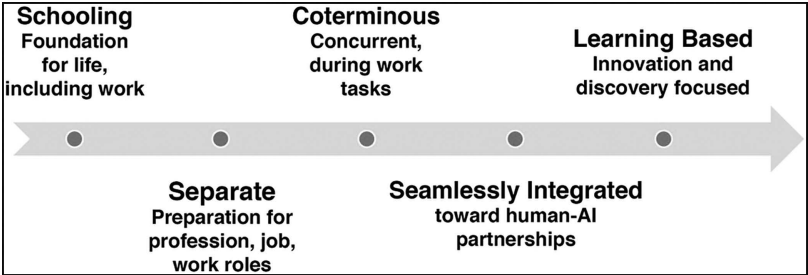


FIGURE 6.1 Shifts in relationship between work and learning over time. First published in Malloch et al. (Sage Publications, 2022, p. 178)

what makes them effective, enabling learners to build the associated capabilities. Learning-based work, in contrast, emphasises innovation, adaptation, or even a complete departure from what is known or predictable given a changing, complex, interdependent environment. Its primary purpose is learning, which in turn guides and influences the nature of work.

The knowledge explosion has made continuous, lifelong, informal, and recurrent education at work a necessity. Digital workplace environments accelerate this need even as they make learning more available anywhere, any time – often in tailored, personalised modalities. As we noted when introducing the idea of LBW, when innovation, change, or unanticipated circumstances arise, the balance of learning and work shifts:

When learning and work are fully integrated, learning may precede, and therefore shape, work. Work in this instance is often discovery; it might be figuring out a new way to solve a persistent problem or adapt a tool to one's context, rather than gaining the skills to build a known product or implement a routine process. The organisation makes tools and resources available; the individual finds resources through their own network and personal digital libraries; or teams combine their collective wisdom to create new knowledge.

(Marsick et al., 2022, p. 182)

Learning is becoming more organic, often bubbling up rather than cascading down, to build individual and organisational capacity for emergent challenges and opportunities.

LBW Core Principles and Sightings

As we sought examples of LBW in organisations, we grappled with how this form of learning differs from other workplace learning. LBW can be formal, informal, or incidental – so what, if anything, makes it distinct? In reviewing dozens of interviews we conducted with learning and development practitioners for *Rethinking Learning and Development* (Watkins & Marsick, 2023), we saw echoes of LBW across financial services, smart manufacturing, digital technologies, self-managing organisations, start-ups, professional services, STEM industries, pharmaceuticals, the military, media, and healthcare. From these cases, several themes emerged that led us to identify five core principles of LBW. While not uncommon on their own, taken together, these principles form a powerful undergirding for LBW. They sometimes overlap and appear in some examples but not in others. They are:

1. Change is everywhere, all the time. We live in permanent liminal learning spaces.
2. In a complex environment, work is a process of emergence that unfolds through collective learning.

3. Learning is the only way to navigate the unpredictability of complexity. It requires “what if” learning and the generation of alternatives.
4. Learning in a complex work environment is motivated by a strong sense of purpose.
5. The learning professional’s role is less about subject matter expertise than about creating a learning-rich culture.

To elaborate, we refer to the illustrations below as *sightings* to acknowledge that full-blown LBW is not yet prevalent in most organisations, nor is it well researched. We borrow the term from Barnett and Jackson (2020), who used it to examine learning ecologies, in order to expand on the meaning of these LBW principles.

1. Change is everywhere, all the time. We live in permanent liminal spaces

A hospital emergency room exemplifies how change and liminality are constants in highly interdependent ecosystems. In this example, Covid-19 amplified the uncertainty health teams routinely face in the clinical learning environment (Papanagnou et al., 2022). With little or no information about the disease or its treatment, staff experienced “epistemic uncertainty that came with simply not knowing” enough about the organism they were facing or “how to care for their patients” (p. 1138). They were also confronted with a new kind of moral uncertainty when forced to “ration care for patients.” These unknowns created liminal learning spaces in which physicians “ran small experiments when the patient and/or their families agreed” (Vaid et al., 2023, p. 5); consulted alternative – sometimes atypical – sources of information; and thought “out of the box” for ways to communicate safely and to provide comfort to patients. As a result, physicians began to question long-standing assumptions:

Everyone has a job. Everyone knows their job. All of a sudden, something is unexpected. Everyone has to pause for a second and process that new data and then decide whether you’re going to continue with what you’re doing and ignore it; or do you have to address it in the moment. You have to constantly look at what’s happening and be ready to change whatever it is you’re doing to react to the circumstances . . . [unpublished interview transcript].

Physicians were forced into liminal spaces created by uncertainty and had to lean into their discomfort with the ambiguity of “learning on the fly” (Wofford et al., 2013). While they learned as they always did (e.g., reading, talking to colleagues, sharing cases, etc.), they also drew on prior medical knowledge of viral respiratory diseases, adjusting their approaches through trial-and-error, so long as regulations were not violated. They might think out loud “when . . . faced with the

thing that I don't know anything about," sometimes sketching various explanations on paper while "teaching the fellows" so "it becomes a learning and sharing moment." They would "fall back on good critical care strategies, informed by evidence-based medicine that is proven and known to work" most, though not all, of the time (Vaid et al., 2023, p. 5). Tapping into creativity, some physicians used iPads and internet-based software to facilitate communication between patients and families. One explored alternative treatments instead of immediate intubation and others sometimes adopted these approaches when warranted – illustrating how a shift into liminal space opened the door to new options sparked by another physician's learning.

This example illustrates Principle 1, showing how the pandemic gave medical professionals an opportunity to move beyond routine practice and learn informally and incidentally in uncertainty. Pendleton-Jullian and Seely Brown (2018) discuss the need to develop pragmatic imagination in such circumstances, and some physicians did just that. We conclude that incidental, on-the-fly learning plays an outsized role in liminal spaces where change is constant and often (though not always) complex, underscoring its significance in adaptive professional practice.

2. *In a complex environment, work processes unfold through collective learning*

Working with the company's culture enabled a human resources specialist to foster natural, emergent, collective learning at ESPN, a sports television channel owned by Disney. Vice President Tonya Cornelius noticed the culture of meeting over food in the company cafeteria and used this as the cornerstone for an employee engagement initiative. Cornelius created an intervention – described below – that fit the culture and wove it into the fabric of the organisation. By keeping the learning design flexible and adaptable, she enabled conversations to evolve from structured learning sessions to spontaneous collective practices of "how we do things here." She noted:

I believe people learn in small groups that are in conversation with one another. We have a culture where people like to meet. The cafe, for example, on our campus in Bristol buzzes. It's the hub, the nerve centre of the campus because people come there and they meet, eat, and have conversations. People love to come together and have discussions and dialogue. We thought, "That's cultural for us."

(Cornelius in Watkins & Marsick, 2023, p. 84).

The conversations initiative began as an informal learning experience where employees gathered over a catered lunch to explore what inclusiveness meant to them and to share their own stories of inclusion. These employee-led conversations, called *Every Voice Matters* to stress the importance of hearing directly from

staff, created a safe space for people to speak up and be heard. When the pandemic hit, the conversations moved online. By listening carefully, Cornelius and her team learned that when leaders ask people what is on their minds before presenting their own agenda, they create a safe space. And when leaders share their own stories of vulnerability, then others also share theirs. Suddenly people were asking for “inclusive conversations” on other topics such as health and safety. Insights from these sessions also led the Human Resources team to develop and distribute employee wellbeing kits. Following George Floyd’s murder, Black employees held inclusive conversations to voice their concerns. When Florida passed the “Don’t Say Gay” legislation, more than 500 employees from every level of the organisation participated in an inclusive conversation. Cornelius concluded:

Inclusive conversations evolved over time from being this DEI [Diversity, Equity, Inclusion] driven, “we’re going to understand inclusion,” to responding to things that matter that are top of mind for our employees and the employee resource groups leading those conversations. [Now] inclusive conversations have become cultural to ESPN over these two-and-a-half years. It is now just part of the lingo, “Oh, we’re having an inclusive conversation.”

(Cornelius in Watkins & Marsick, 2023, pp. 86–87)

This example demonstrates Principle 2: in a complex environment, collective learning through inclusive conversations led to the emergence of work. A top-down change management initiative would not have produced the employee-informed work practices that emerged organically. By providing a light framework and relinquishing control, learners “helped us to understand what is an inclusive experience for them” (unpublished interview transcript). That enabled solutions implementable by both management and employees, thus shaping work to address shared concerns. This example also highlights the importance of a learning-rich culture (Principle 5) in which people “engage with each other according to a short list of rules” (Human Systems Dynamics Institute, 2023).

3. *Learning is the only way to navigate the unpredictability of complexity. It requires “what if” learning and the generation of alternatives*

Recalling the early days of the pandemic, Molly Nagler, Chief Learning Officer at PepsiCo, said: “Suddenly, we’d gone from interacting with one another in person to sitting behind our computers alone at home. Thus began our efforts to craft an entirely different approach to learning and working” (Nagler in Watkins & Marsick, 2023, p. 4). Nagler and her team quickly considered what they could do online to “continue to provide learning opportunities regardless of where our employees were.” That meant “question[ing] our own assumptions” – particularly around learner control and culture change in digital contexts.

They switched from a traditional top-down curriculum to a bottom-up “learner experience platform” so that learners could “create their own pathways.” They also “saw an unmet need to discuss topics that aren’t generally covered in professional settings, including mental health and even grief.” To build community, the team encouraged chat for informal questions, shared stories, and peer support. For training, they chose Zoom – already familiar to employees – so they could challenge learners “with new ideas and concepts, not with tricky logins and tech.” This approach broadened access to learning for many who had previously been excluded by time and cost constraints.

Nagler’s team deliberately challenged their pre-pandemic assumptions about good learning practices. They began to ask “what if” questions and imagined new approaches to learning and development (Watkins & Marsick, 2023, pp. 4–6). They learned “to be creative and stay true to the values we have as an organisation,” leveraging PepsiCo’s culture and environment to facilitate the digital shift while still meeting employees’ needs both mentally and physically.

This example illustrates the importance of challenging existing assumptions about work amidst complexity. Guided by learning, the PepsiCo team quickly and successfully navigated the unpredictability of the changing work environment (Principle 3). And while the team stayed true to PepsiCo’s core culture and values, they intervened at the boundaries to create, test, and inquire into the value of learner-centred initiatives, forming a path for permanent liminal spaces to arise (Principle 1) and reinforcing a learning-rich culture (Principle 5).

4. Learning in a complex work environment is motivated by a strong sense of purpose

Organisations can motivate learning in complexity by tapping employee intrinsic motivation, as Unilever – a global consumer products company – did when preparing employees for a future in which their jobs might be replaced by technology (Hull, 2023). The learning and development team began by working with employees to identify their individual purpose. More than 50,000 employees attended workshops to define what they uniquely bring to Unilever – the “red thread” woven throughout their life and work that gives them energy and guides what they seek in future employment, whether within or beyond Unilever. The team then used AI software to identify the skillsets inherent in current roles and matched them to other roles, showing employees their transferable skillsets. Finally, the team helped employees design “future fit” individual learning plans to prepare for next-step opportunities.

Similarly, IBM created a technology-supported learning platform based on self-motivation, in contrast to the company’s historically top-down mandates and standardised competencies. Gordon Fuller (Watkins & Marsick, 2023) found that a majority of IBM employees were seeking learning outside of the company because they could not get what they needed internally. Valuing their tacit knowledge of culture and norms, he sought to create internal employment opportunities for those

wishing to learn new skills. He developed a self-managed, technology-supported platform that allowed employees to select their own learning paths. Drawing on Pink's (2009) framework of purpose, mastery, and autonomy, Fuller tapped into intrinsic motivations while aligning with environmental changes and business needs: "It's easy to give people autonomy when they are deeply committed to the common purpose and really good at what they do. Earned autonomy is a tremendous motivator" (unpublished interview transcript).

The IBM and Unilever examples demonstrate the central role of individual purpose in motivating learning amidst complexity. At the same time, they highlight that purpose can only thrive within a learning-rich culture (Principle 5) that provides a flexible framework for growth. Together, purpose and culture create conditions where self-directed learning is not only supported but also aligned with collective organisational goals.

5. The learning professional's role is less about subject matter expertise than it is about creating a learning-rich culture

To align with his company's shift towards customer-centric innovation, learning specialist Bill Gardner (Gardner in Watkins & Marsick, 2023) reconceptualised his role as creating a learning-rich, customer-centric culture. He recognised that traditional instructional systems design models no longer fit the innovative, high-technology learning environment. His own thinking about learning design was disrupted when the chief technical officer to whom he reported delivered an ultimatum about how learning had to change:

You [training & development] guys just don't really get it. . . . We don't want to talk with you. We don't want to participate in any kind of process that you've got. You need to know the company and us [internal clients] well enough without [us] having conversations with you. You need to know what we need, and you need to present it in five to ten-minute chunks that we can get at when we need it.

(Unpublished interview transcript)

This feedback prompted Gardner and his team to rethink learning design – no longer as something separate from work but integrated into the workflow and open to innovation. In researching alternatives, they found ways to help teams create dialogue and brainstorm new solutions to complex problems. They adopted a complexity-based FlowTeam Design (Gardner in Watkins & Marsick, 2023, p. 96), incorporating design thinking and elements of "agile management" (Dong et al., 2024) – a knowledge-intensive, highly collaborative work process used by self-organising, cross-functional teams. Gardner concluded:

FlowTeam Design upset my paradigm of learning design. L&D in the industrial era focused on subject-matter expertise. . . . So, a big shift for me was that we

moved to learner-centric design. We had to know our learners way better than we knew them in the past, and we had to give them more control over what they needed and wanted to learn because what *I* think they need to learn is secondary to what *they* think they need to learn.

(Gardner in Watkins & Marsick, 2023, p. 97)

Gardner was challenged to “unlearn” the primacy of subject matter expertise and relinquish control to learners. Methodologies such as agile management assume that knowledge is in constant flux and best harnessed collectively. Interactive, iterative approaches to learning ensure access to continually changing information (Principle 2). A learner-centric model also provides a springboard for cultivating a learning-rich culture (Principle 5).

Learning-based work prioritises learning precisely because it is not possible to predict what work will be necessary in a constantly changing, interdependent world. Professionals who design and support learning and development in organisations must let go of industrial-age values and practices, especially command-and-control organising frameworks, and rethink their purpose (Principle 4) to become “emergence watchers,” and creators and holders of permanent liminal learning spaces (Principle 1) to enable experimentation and innovation.

Integrative Example

The above examples are sightings and possibilities for aspects of LBW. They are tied to a particular time, place, person or event, though we can see ripples of interaction and impacts within the larger environments and systems in which they are embedded. Here we describe an integrated case of LBW that embodies all five principles in ways that are sometimes at the centre, sometimes in the background. We show how the Geneva Learning Foundation (GLF) nurtures liminal learning communities to support an ambitious, ongoing, global Immunization Agenda 2030 to which GLF has been contributing through its professional development initiatives. While some aspects of the GLF example reflect older work-based learning models, the integration of all five LBW principles in this example highlights LBW as a holistic and unique concept.

One of GLF’s initiatives was a series of digital courses “for immunisation personnel working in low- and middle-income countries, connecting in-country central planners, frontline workers, and global actors” to achieve challenging immunisation goals by 2030 (Marsick et al., 2022, p. 185). Participants were skilled professionals working across hierarchical levels and roles. GLF Director, Reda Sadki, recognised that in today’s complex environments – intensified by the pandemic, climate change, migrations, war, and violence – there are no clear or easy answers to the rejection or acceptance of immunisation (Principle 1). To strengthen vaccination efforts in this unpredictable context (Principle 2), Sadki designed liminal, collaborative virtual learning spaces to facilitate the emergence of strategies to meet ambitious goals (Principle 5).

Building on his prior work with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Sadki began experimenting with an online learning forum to share the vast knowledge and experience of participants. Peers could learn from one another, challenge counterproductive beliefs or practices, and generate creative new approaches to achieving vaccination goals (Marsick et al., 2022; Watkins & Marsick, 2023).

Placing peer learning at the centre, Sadki questioned traditional assumptions about the role of healthcare industry experts in programme design and implementation. He built learning communities and networks of diverse healthcare providers from different countries and backgrounds (Principle 2):

In a Teach to Reach Conference . . . [conference designers] set up opportunities for people to pair off and talk to one another about their field experiences with vaccinations. . . . [They] had some 56 workshops and formal sessions, but more participation [occurred] through some 14,000 networking meetings where you pressed a button and you were randomly matched with someone else at the conference. That gave birth to a quarterly event dedicated entirely to networking, which has continued to grow.

(Sadki in Watkins & Marsick, 2023, p. 56)

Sadki did not approach learning as a “one and done” knowledge activity. He built sustainable learning communities that were driven by purpose (Principle 4):

the first point of contact is social. It’s somebody they know who’s going to share with them on WhatsApp the invitation to join the program. Second are steps that test motivation and commitment because they could be seen as barriers to entry. . . . We start with didactic steps, combined with some inspirational messages, e.g. asking them to reflect on why they are committed to the program.

(Sadki in Watkins & Marsick, 2023, p. 57)

The GLF centred its work on what participants were personally committed to doing or improving. While drawing on a range of knowledge resources, facilitators designed activities around emerging interests, adapting “every part of the design . . . every day . . . so there’s no disconnect between the design and implementation.” They prioritised inspirational, affective experiences, recognising their impact on “people in the room having those moments of coming to consciousness, realising their problems are shared, and feeling stronger because of it” (Sadki in Watkins & Marsick, 2023, p. 58) (Principle 2). The GLF also supported participants in pursuing their goals after returning to their home environments. For example, they created an “Ideas Engine” wherein

people engaged in experimentation to share ideas and practices and give and receive feedback on them. That’s followed by situation analysis . . . and action

planning. . . . And that's followed by the Impact Accelerator. . . . We help people figure out what they can actually do within the constraints they have. After these steps there's ongoing longitudinal reporting.

(Sadki in Watkins & Marsick, 2023, p. 57)

Sadki saw his role as facilitating a rich learning environment (Principle 5), rather than acting as a technical expert, even though he had accumulated much expertise over the years. He reflected:

About ten years ago, I began to think of my goal for these discussion groups like the musician, the artist that you most appreciate, who really moves your soul, moves you, your every fibre and your body and your soul and your mind.

He recalled a Pink Floyd concert that so moved him it became an exhilarating experience: "That's what I would like people who participate in our events to feel. I believe that's a key to fostering the dynamics that will lead to effective teaching and learning and change as an outcome" (Sadki in Watkins & Marsick, 2023, p. 59).

Through relentless, digitally enabled innovation and persistent follow-up, Sadki and his colleagues designed "creation spaces" (Hagel et al., 2010) to nurture and connect like-minded yet diverse individuals. These spaces offered unique opportunities to share innovations and find support in overcoming obstacles and resource scarcity. Hagel et al. identify three components of pull-in creation spaces evident in the GLF example:

Pull platforms provide . . . opportunity to engage in the first two levels of pull – access and attraction. . . . But not all pull platforms effectively support the third level of pull. . . . few are yet the creation spaces that best help participants achieve their potential . . . [by helping] participants engage with each other around collaborative creation activities, and in the process, to build long-term, trust-based relationships.[These spaces] create ways for individuals to connect with each other across teams to explore innovative approaches to particularly vexing problems . . . they provide robust spaces for participants to learn rapidly through the creation of new knowledge. Everybody who takes part can achieve their potential by pulling out higher and higher levels of performance.

(Hagel et al., 2010, pp. 129–130)

Discussion

Glimpses and potential of LBW

As noted earlier, we have caught glimpses of learning-based work more often than full-blown examples. LBW thrives more in organisations adapting to shifts in the nature of work – altering organisational forms and networking ecologies of work

and learning. These shifts are accelerated by complexity, generative AI, globalisation, and socio-economic change. They are reflected in notions such as the “Fourth Industrial Revolution” (Hoffman & Rüsch, 2017), the Great Reset incited by the Covid-19 pandemic (Schwab & Malleret, 2020), the Agile Manifesto (Beck et al., 2001), and growing trends of self-management in organisations (Laloux, 2014). Research on LBW in such contexts is still nascent. Even so, we consider LBW worthy of deeper examination in both research and practice, while acknowledging that not all learning can – or should – take the form of LBW. LBW thus represents an emerging construct that warrants continued exploration as organisations confront ongoing disruption.

Liminal spaces as catalysts for learning

LBW calls for the creation of collaborative liminal spaces at and between system boundaries (Pendleton-Jullian & Seely Brown, 2018) to foster learning, innovation, and experimentation. Introduced by Van Gennep (1909/1960) to describe rites of passage, liminality was later extended by Turner, who characterised such transitions as “ambiguous . . . betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner, 1977, pp. 94–95 as cited in Eller, J.D., 2025, p. 22). Liminal spaces provide temporary communities that enable productive relationships because, as Turner (1977 cited in Eller, J.D., 2025) hypothesised, people are freed from habitual expectations tied to roles and social norms (Turner p. 132 in Eller, J. D., 2025, p. 22). In this way, liminal spaces support collaborative discussions across disciplines and hierarchies. LBW depends on such spaces, where boundaries blur and experimentation becomes possible.

Experimentation and organisational change

Pendleton-Jullian and Seely Brown (2018) argue that learners can intervene at system boundaries in liminal spaces through an interactive mix of modulators and probes that support experimentation and adjustment. Physicians, for example, departed from evidence-based guidelines and adjusted treatments when patient responses warranted it. In so doing, learners pursued their own interests and purpose, creating benefits beyond individual development. Yet organisations must also change if they are to create new learning spaces that enable and value LBW outcomes in reframing goals and strategies. Physicians shared adaptations through local debriefs, but extending their learning more broadly in the hospital system proved difficult. LBW highlights both the promise of experimentation and the organisational change required to sustain it.

Creativity and multiple perspectives

Liminal spaces offer places where the rules do not always apply, much as glitches in algorithms allow game players to break rules to pursue their own purposes beyond

the game boundaries. They constitute transitional “time out” zones in which individuals can think and create freely without fear of feedback that might prematurely shut down exploration. At the boundaries, liminal spaces free creativity and support multiple perspectives. LBW flourishes when organisations legitimise such spaces, encouraging creativity and diverse viewpoints.

Facilitators and orchestration

LBW prioritises learning precisely because in complex environments it is not always possible to predict the best way to achieve goals – or, in some cases, even to determine the goals themselves – given the constant change generated by interdependence across ecosystems. As Gardner explains, it is difficult for managers, leaders, and learning specialists shaped by industrial-age values to let go of command-and-control frameworks. The facilitator’s role shifts from directing actions to “orchestrating” learning: opening spaces for diverse voices, considering alternatives rather than rejecting them prematurely, and building capacity to tolerate and negotiate competing priorities and conflicting interests. LBW reframes leadership as the orchestration of learning rather than the control of tasks.

Evidence from knowledge work

For knowledge workers, LBW has been bubbling up for some time. Through extensive fieldwork, both conducted directly and through our students’ studies (e.g., Watkins & Marsick, 2023; Eller, K.F., 2025; Lim, 2022; Jinks, 2022), we have observed that the growing complexity of dynamic work environments prompts workers to adopt LBW as they navigate changing contexts, problems, and technologies. Planning formal workplace learning and development has become more challenging, since traditional training often assumed fixed goals and predictable outcomes – assumptions that no longer hold true. Bateson (2022, p. 990) similarly argues that organisations face unpredictability when planning change and need “to become *ready* to respond in new ways,” an approach well suited to LBW. LBW aligns with the lived reality of knowledge workers, who must learn continuously to adapt to shifting demands.

Shifts and barriers in organisational practice

Organisations must adjust structures, cultures, and practices to enable and support LBW. A key shift involves change management strategies, which are often top-down drivers of prescribed solutions. Such approaches can work when standardisation is desired and outcomes are predictable. Under conditions of complexity, by contrast, change occurs locally via adaptive learning driven by purpose-motivated employees. Results cannot always be predicted but they can be noticed and leveraged as they emerge to guide innovation.

Employees engaged in knowledge work increasingly arrive at the workplace with a passion for learning and a desire to direct their own learning. With higher levels of education and training, many also bring the skills and mindset to “learn how to learn.” Yet not everyone knows how to learn, nor are they always given leeway to do so. To create a learning environment, organisations may need to pair structural change with building learning-to-learn and critical thinking skills. Employees also require supportive management willing to delegate and authorise innovation.

A fundamental barrier to LBW is the persistence of command-and-control industrial systems, which are hierarchical and prioritise standardised training for routine tasks. Such systems can be effective for repetitive work. However, with the advance of intelligent technologies (see Harteis, 2026), many “best practices” need updating – or even transformation – due to unpredictability and interdependence. Traditional predictability requires controlling the environment and using managerial hierarchies to break tasks into components for team allocation. This model is the opposite of the generative collective learning needed to create and test multiple solutions in liminal learning spaces, making LBW a necessity rather than a luxury. LBW requires organisations to dismantle industrial-age barriers and embrace structures that foster adaptive, collective learning.

Conclusion

Learning-based work is an emerging theory that requires further refinement and evolution through research and practice. The evolving relationship between work and learning suggests that while formal, separated learning remains necessary for certain professions, the best facilitators may be peers who have addressed similar challenges in similar workplace contexts and are willing to help problem solve in uncertainty. This marks a fundamental shift for workplace learning and development professionals, who can no longer rely only on training curricula or curated content. They must develop a learning-rich culture, supporting employees whose focus extends beyond upskilling for current jobs to reskilling for future ones.

LBW prioritises learning because in constant change, goals cannot always be predicted. Leaders and learning specialists become “emergence watchers,” holders of learning space, and creators of liminal environments that enable experimentation and innovation. Organisations must also adapt structures, cultures, and practices to enable LBW. Top-down change strategies are ineffective in complexity; adaptive learning happens organically when it engages the hearts and minds of learners, meets their intrinsic drive and purpose, and is supported by the organisation.

Challenges lie ahead for organisations at the nexus of life transitions, work and learning amid global uncertainties. Watkins and Marsick (2023) warn that the “shadow side of . . . learning in the workflow can be exploitation and surveillance, given the capacities of technology and data analytics to track employees’ online work” (pp. 142–143) and demand distorted performance. They also caution against “rosy estimations” of partnerships with intelligent technologies, given the history of management-labour relationship, discrimination, and other negative forces,

questioning who is best authorised to control learner choices. Employers may disregard employees' learning directions instead of building on them, as researched by Poell et al. (2018, 2026).

Intelligent technologies may open liminal spaces for learning in dynamic adaptive circumstances but also bring contradictions, ambivalence, constraints, and loss. Socio-political-economic forces and inequalities influence whether and how learners adapt to new conditions. Further research is therefore needed to examine LBW in organisations where the nature of work is evolving to explore potential contradictions that arise. There is an opportunity to refine and evolve LBW as leaders and human resource developers shift their focus from "managing" change to "ready-ing" (Bateson, 2022) an organisation for an unknown future.

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7

LEARNING BY TRANSLATIONS

Situated Learning in a World of Diverging Knowledges

Jörg Dinkelaker

Introduction

Adult learning frequently unfolds in situations where diverse bodies of knowledge, cultural references, and frameworks of meaning intersect. Rather than being shaped by a single, coherent horizon of knowledge, many learning contexts are characterised by the simultaneous presence of multiple – and sometimes conflicting – knowledge horizons. This chapter examines the specific conditions under which adult learning becomes possible in such contexts of epistemic plurality. It begins with the observation that learning in these conditions requires navigating among these horizons – engaging with their differences, translating across them, and building new relations between them. To investigate these dynamics, I develop an interpretive analysis of how learning unfolds when epistemic differences are negotiated. Building on and critically extending the concept of situated learning, I argue for a deeper examination of how translation relations shape learning, as different discourses, practices, and epistemic contexts intersect and interfere.

In a *first step*, the chapter outlines a conceptual framework for examining empirical situations of learning under conditions of epistemic plurality. This analytical perspective draws attention to how social situations are co-enacted, maintained, and transformed by those who participate in them. It focuses on situations in which multiple knowledge contexts are made simultaneously relevant. The process of relating these distinct epistemic horizons is conceptualised as a practice of translation. Translations are understood as acts of navigating boundaries between diverging epistemic contexts. In critical engagement with the concept of situated learning, episodes of learning by translations are interpreted as dynamics in which changes in social participation are intertwined with such boundary work.

In a *second step*, the chapter presents a comparative empirical analysis of three distinct situations that have unfolded in very different contexts and in which moments of *learning by translations* can be identified. These three situations were selected for the investigation of different types of configurations of epistemic plurality.

Configurations of *cross-boundary participation* are characterised by the entry of a person into a new epistemic community, while their previous participation in other communities is marked as also relevant. Such a constellation is exemplified by the case of a well-qualified new employee being introduced into a company.

Configurations of *cross-boundary communication* are marked by the appropriation of a concept or idea within an epistemic community that originally emerged in a different one. An example is the uptake of the meteorological concept of climate change by financial economics, where it is reframed as the notion of climate risks.

Configurations of *third-party interaction* are characterised by individuals from different epistemic communities working together on a shared task, where the assumption of their differing backgrounds constitutes the situation. This constellation is exemplified by gamified training formats in workplace learning. These three examples are compared to identify specific features of learning associated with each boundary configuration. Across all configurations, common features and underlying dynamics of translational learning can be discerned.

In a *third step*, I highlight the need for further comparative and empirically grounded analyses to understand how knowledge, participation, and learning interrelate under contemporary conditions of increasing epistemic diversity.

Analytical Framework: Co-enactment of Social Situations and Learning as Situated Translation Practice

This section introduces the analytical framework I use to examine learning in situations marked by epistemic plurality. It involves three conceptual strands: the co-enactment of social situations, the practice of translation, and the notion of situated learning. Drawing on linguistic anthropology, I ask how social situations are dynamically constituted through participation and interaction. Translation is conceptualised as the situated negotiation of epistemic differences – describing how knowledge horizons are differentiated and brought into relation within concrete social encounters. From this perspective, the notion of situated learning can be expanded from the dynamics of participating in a single community of practice to a relational process situated in negotiations of differences between multiple epistemic communities.

Co-construction of translation relations in social interactions

The empirical analysis of how learning occurs in situations of epistemic plurality proceeds from an observational standpoint that centres on how social situations

are enacted, maintained, and transformed by those involved in them. In what follows, I outline how translation relations become empirically and analytically visible from this perspective. The approach adopted here draws on a line of inquiry developed in linguistic anthropology, particularly in the work of Chuck and Candy Goodwin, who describe their focus as an investigation of “how multiple participants are building in concert with each other the actions that define and shape their lifeworld” (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004, p. 223). This perspective emphasises two interrelated dimensions: first, that it is the situated activities of the participants themselves that constitute the social reality of the situation; and second, that the form and coordination of these activities define the nature of the situation. Methodologically, this framework can be seen as a variant of interpretive social research, while conceptually it aligns with a specific strand of social constructivism concerned with the relational constitution of meaning in interaction. The starting point of the analysis lies in examining how participants indicate what the situation is about and how they position themselves and others within it (Goffman, 1966).

Translation, then, can be understood as a particular way of such engaging with and making sense of social situations. Starting from this perspective, translation relations can be defined as situations, in which at least two different contexts of meaning making are distinguished and made relevant by the participants. It is assumed that more than one horizon of knowledge matters and that an attempt is being made to transfer meaning from one context into another. This corresponds to the definition of translation as proposed by Susan Gal, who describes it as “the expression in one semiotic system of what has been said, written, or done in another” (Gal, 2015, p. 227). Translations allow something relevant to be carried across even as the difference between the involved contexts itself remains. A statement or act that holds significance within one knowledge horizon is transferred into another, such that a similar meaning is invoked. Translations are inherently dynamic processes, intertwining sameness and difference in productive ways. They “purport to change the form, the social place, or the meaning of a text, object, person, or practice while simultaneously seeming to keep something about it the same” (Gal, 2015, p. 226). Any act of translation must navigate this inherent paradox of “sameness-in-difference” (Gal, 2015). Translations, therefore, must balance competing demands: they must remain true to the original while adapting to the nuances of the target context. On the one hand, translations forge semiotic connections between distinct epistemic horizons and on the other, they presuppose – and thus reinforce – the distinctions that define those horizons (Dinkelaker & Wenten, 2024). What defines the involved epistemic horizons as different is that each organises semantic references and notions of relevance in its own way and legitimises knowledge claims through different means. Importantly, the identification of what qualifies as a translation – and where the boundaries between knowledge contexts are drawn – is not determined by definitions of the researcher but is jointly produced by the participants in the situation. In translational situations, participants are typically positioned in relation to the knowledge

contexts being negotiated – some are associated with one epistemic framework, others with another (Dinkelaker, 2024).

Learning by translations as the negotiation of participation in situated boundary-work

Not only translation but also learning can be observed as something jointly produced and maintained within social interactions. From the standpoint of a social co-construction of meaning, learning appears not as an individual, internal process but rather as a situationally defined social reality (see also Dinkelaker, 2007, 2008; Alkemeyer & Buschmann, 2016). The concept of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) provides a detailed account of how learning is co-enacted in social situations. It does so by centring the dynamics of participation. However, this approach remains limited to learning processes *within* a single knowledge horizon and does not address how learning unfolds across the boundaries of communities (Engeström, 2007; Fuller, 2007). Hence, while the model is useful for analysing the dynamics of learning as a social co-construction, it must be critically examined and extended to account for situations in which participation is negotiated in relation to divergent epistemic communities.

Within the concept of situated learning in communities of practice, learning is understood as a process in which engagement in specific, meaningfully structured collective practices is not merely a prerequisite but the very foundation of learning. Communities of practice define particular roles for participation – from legitimate peripheral involvement to more central positions that sustain and transform the community's practice. Learning is enacted by participants' progression from situations of peripheral to situations of more central involvement. While analysis of participation trajectories can also be fruitfully applied to the study of *learning by translations*, the model of learning as a gradual transition from peripheral to central forms of participation proves insufficient for capturing what is actually taking place in situations of epistemic plurality.

If learning is not constituted by a gradual process of becoming familiar with a single, shared horizon of knowledge but rather begins with the recognition of epistemic differences, then how can it be understood and observed as a transformation of participation roles? The concept of translation draws attention to how differences between contexts of meaning-making are marked and navigated. The concept of participation, in turn, foregrounds the question of who is regarded as relevant and belonging to each context that is situationally invoked. The following case-based analyses of situations of learning by translation explore the analytical potential of examining participation and translation in conjunction (Dinkelaker & Wenten, 2024). A productive framework for interlinking translation and participation is offered by Anselm Strauss's theory of social worlds (Strauss, 1978), particularly through the concept of boundary work, which enables the empirical analysis of interfaces and relations of exchange between distinct social worlds (Star &

Griesemer, 1989; Bowker & Star, 1999). Such boundary work occurs in situations involving multiple social contexts, each generating meaning according to its own logic. It involves defining who and what is considered part of the respective social worlds and determining where the boundaries between them are drawn. From this perspective, boundaries are not stable demarcations or the edges of clearly delineated entities (Abbot, 1995). Rather, the contours of knowledge contexts are continuously reshaped through situational acts of boundary work. This includes the negotiation of frameworks of participation statuses (Unruh, 1979). From this perspective, learning by translation can be understood as a way of “doing crossing boundaries” (Dinkelaker, 2024). The term “learning by translations” refers to situations in which boundaries between epistemic communities are indicated, participants are positioned in relation to these boundaries, and the conditions of participation are reconfigured. As will become evident, differences in meaning and relevance do not appear as barriers in such learning dynamics, but rather as productive conditions for situated learning.

The outlined perspective on the social situatedness of translational learning systematically brackets questions concerning intra-individual learning dynamics. This is not to suggest that such internal processes are irrelevant. Rather, the focus on the social enactment of learning is intended to enable a more precise account of how learning is socially situated and co-created – that is, of the conditions under which participants relate both to their own learning and to the learning of others.

Configurations of Learning by Translation: Examples of Navigating Epistemic Differences

Situations in which boundaries between epistemic communities are marked and meaning is conveyed across those boundaries can occur in different configurations. This section examines three such configurations, each illustrating a distinct way in which the relationship between participation, boundary negotiation, and learning is constituted. Each situation shows how adult learners encounter, navigate, and respond to epistemic plurality.

Configurations of *cross-boundary participation* involve individuals entering a new epistemic community while their prior membership in another is marked as relevant. *Cross-boundary communication* refers to cases where an object, text, or idea is appropriated by one community but recognised as originating from another. *Third-space interaction* describes situations in which participants, aware of their differing affiliations, collaboratively build a shared frame that cannot be reduced to any single community.

Analysis of the examples aims to deepen our understanding of the relationships between translation, participation, and learning as they develop in the respective situations. For this purpose, I draw on empirically documented cases that have been examined and recorded within different ethnographic studies. I discuss situations of *cross-boundary participation* using the example of the introduction

of a highly trained employee into her new position at a real asset management company. This case was documented as part of the research project “Dealing with Knowledge in Social Worlds” (Kade & Seitter, 2006). Situations of *cross-boundary communication* are examined through the case of the importation of the scientific concept of “climate change” into the financial economy, mediated by the term “climate risk”. This case was documented by Candis Callison (2014) in her study “How Climate Change Comes to Matter. The Communal Life of Facts”. I discuss situations of *third-space interaction* using the example of multi-professional teams engaged in the gamification of instructional settings. This case was documented by Claudia Friedrich (2025) in her study “Negotiating the Mediation of Knowledge in the Social World of Gamification”. I begin in each case by describing how boundaries between epistemic communities are drawn and how transitions across them are performed. Based on this, the analysis explores how learning is addressed and processed within the interaction. Finally, I compare the configurations of translation, participation, and learning established in each case, focusing on their differences and commonalities.

Learning in a situation of cross-boundary participation: the first day in a new company

In contemporary society, individuals are typically not involved in just one single but rather in multiple communities of practice simultaneously (James, 2007). This multiplicity has significant implications for how socially situated learning must be conceptualised (Engeström, 2007; Fuchs, 2023). Since each community defines its own framework for participation and meaning making, moving across communities requires navigating multiple and potentially conflicting modes of involvement and knowledge.

The challenges involved in such moments are explored in the following analysis of a situation that was interpreted by the participants as a moment of entry into a community of practice to which the focal individual did not previously belong. In contrast to the assumptions of the model of situated learning in communities of practice, the individual was not expected to begin in a peripheral role. Instead, she was assigned a position of responsibility from the very beginning. The situation takes place on her first working day as a new employee.¹

The initial configuration of the situation is as follows:

It is the first day at work for a professional (“Newco”) who has joined a company specialising in the management of industrial estates. She is expected to take on a position of responsibility and to maintain core procedures within her field of expertise. Newco brings substantial training and knowledge to the role, and the company explicitly aims to draw on her professional competence. Two established employees (“Esta A” and “Esta B”) have been assigned to introduce her to the company and to support her induction.

Although Newco is an expert in her field, she is treated as a novice within the company. However, this novice status is not intended to exclude her from responsible action. On the contrary, Newco was specifically hired to take responsibility for her area of expertise. In terms of situated learning, Esta A and Esta B are expected to facilitate a short-cut trajectory – from initially peripheral to instantly accountable participation as swiftly as possible. This challenge is addressed by presenting Newco in two simultaneous referential frames: on the one hand, as an experienced member of her professional community and on the other, as a newcomer to the local community of company employees. This dual address and the ongoing negotiation of these two forms of membership can be observed, for instance, when Esta A and Esta B explain the procedure for separating a leasehold property during the induction process.

Esta A: If a piece of land is now quarried out as a leasehold property (Newco: Yes), it is submitted to the cadastral office and
Newco: Do official cadastral surveyors also need to

Esta A explains how the specific procedure of separating an estate for long-term leasing is carried out within the company. His decision to provide a detailed procedural account implies that the newcomer is not yet familiar with this process – otherwise, such an explanation would be unnecessary.² Newco interrupts the explanation and contributes a detail that had not yet been mentioned. Through this interruption, she challenges Esta A's assumption about her lack of knowledge by signalling that she is already familiar with the procedure and may not require such instruction. In so doing, Newco positions herself as someone well-acquainted with the task she is expected to take on and who brings substantial expertise to the role – this is also marked by her use of technical jargon.³

While Newco presents her prior experience as relevant to the current context, Esta A unsettles her claim to task-appropriate knowledge:

Esta A: “This is done then upstairs by the surveying on the 9th floor”.

Esta A rejects Newco's proposed interpretation of the process and emphasises that official cadastral surveyors are not relevant here. Notably, he does not employ technical terminology to clarify this point but instead resorts to local references such as “upstairs” and “on the 9th floor”. Even the word “surveying”, which might ordinarily be understood as a technical term, is used here in a different sense: it functions as a proper noun, denoting a specific location within the company.

The phrase “the surveying on the 9th floor” thus refers to something that only makes sense within the situated knowledge of the company's internal community of practice. By using these local references instead of adhering to standard professional language, Esta A subtly indicates that, while the newcomer may be familiar with general professional standards, she may not

yet understand how the company uniquely conceptualises and structures its work. In doing so, Esta A underscores that the experience and status Newco brings from outside cannot be straightforwardly enacted within the community at hand. In the course of this exchange, Esta A marks a distinction that had not previously been made explicit: a difference between general professional knowledge about real estate management and the locally specific knowledge embedded in the company's practices. Esta A insinuates that if Newco is to find her place within the organisation, she must come to recognise and acknowledge this difference.

In the very moment the gap between Newco's professional expertise and the company's local practices becomes evident, a process of mutual translation commences in which Newco and the Estas adapt their communication to negotiate a shared understanding:

Newco: Internally here.

Esta B: Yes, yes, they belong to us.

Newco picks up on the meaning behind Esta A's reference and echoes the statement but using the standardised professional term "internally." By combining it with the local marker "here," she signals her willingness to align with the perspective introduced by Esta A. Esta B responds affirmatively to this translation attempt by in turn echoing Newco's phrasing – yet he shifts back to the local expression "they belong to us." This both acknowledges Newco's understanding and subtly rejects the use of standardised terminology. Thus, Newco is recognised as someone capable of grasping what matters within the practice at hand, but also someone who still needs to adopt the local perspective.

As we can see, introducing Newco into her designated role is a delicate process. It requires, on the one hand, recognition of her professional – and therefore external – expertise, and, on the other hand, her understanding and respect for the local conventions that sustain collaboration within the company's community of practice. How these negotiations unfold will have a significant impact on her future participation roles. This delicate task is navigated in distributed roles. By demonstrating her professional expertise, Newco shows that she can meet the job's expectations. At the same time, Esta A and Esta B underscore the differences between standard procedures and local practices, signalling their expectation that Newco will respect and adhere to established local conventions. By marking understanding and adaptation, Newco confirms her ability to align with both professional and local norms.

In this brief episode, a boundary is drawn between two distinct epistemic contexts: the professional domain from which Newco originates and the local context she is about to enter. Newco is positioned in relation to both contexts – she is treated as a competent insider in one, and as a newcomer in the

other. By marking the knowledge and experience she brings from her professional background as relevant but not fully sufficient within the local company setting, the situation becomes an instance of boundary crossing. Newco can neither straightforwardly mobilise the knowledge she brings with her nor can she be regarded as entirely inexperienced. What emerges here is a moment of learning by translation – a process that differs significantly from situated learning as it occurs within a single community of practice. It is not only the transition from a peripheral to a more central position that is at stake here. Rather, the act of relating different horizons of knowledge – and positioning oneself in relation to this horizon difference – constitutes a central aspect of the learning process in this situation. When newcomers are treated not as blank slates but as bringing potentially relevant experience, there are tangible implications for the trajectories of their participation – and accordingly their learning (Wybuwa, 2025).

Applying a translation-theoretical perspective to phenomena of cross-boundary participation, hence, enables a more nuanced understanding of how participation statuses are negotiated – beyond the overly schematic novice–expert dichotomy proposed in the model of situated learning. This resonates with the notion of boundary objects (Star & Griesemer, 1989), which function as flexible points of reference that allow coordination across intersecting social worlds. However, while boundary objects are often material or semiotic artefacts, the translation of participation status involves the embodied, biographical experiences of persons.

Learning in a situation of cross-boundary communication: How the concept of “climate change” has been reframed as “climate risk” in the financial economy

The second type of translation relation I examine is that of *cross-boundary communication*. Unlike participation-based boundary crossings, which centre on individuals entering new communities, these relations arise when information or knowledge travels from one context to another. This transfer also is not a mere transmission – it necessarily involves reinterpretation and recontextualisation. In such cases, the focus is not on negotiating shifting memberships but in making something that has proven meaningful within one epistemic context intelligible and actionable within another.

This is vividly illustrated by the case of the dissemination of the concept of climate change, which was initially developed by means of science. The idea of climate (as measurable pattern of long-term weather), the concept of greenhouse effect (as the effect of the atmospheric concentration of certain gases on earth’s energy budget), as well as the prediction and measurement of global warming as a consequence of anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases was developed over decades by a small community of climate scientists. Yet, the dynamics

identified and described in the bounded context of science have proven relevant far beyond this community. Since each epistemic community establishes its own framework of relevance, any community wishing to deliberate on the meaning and significance of climate change must interpret this scientific concept in terms of its own semiotic system. Thus, climate change must be translated into practical terms specific to each community, inevitably diverging from the language of scientific discourse. The impact of what science refers to as “climate change” must be articulated in the diverse vernaculars of the diverse social worlds in which people participate.

In her study “How Climate Change Comes to Matter. The Communal Life of Facts”, Candis Callison (2014) gathers rich ethnographic evidence about how this translational work unfolds within different epistemic communities. For our purposes here, I focus on her description of how the organisation Ceres translated climate change into a term relevant for the financial economy. Based on participant observation and interviews, Callison illustrates how the non-profit organisation acted as a translational agent, framing the scientific discourse on climate change in terms that resonated with “the vernaculars inherent to the world of finance and corporate interests” (Callison, 2014, p. 207). One of the board members of Ceres described their work in an interview with Callison as follows:

There was a window of opportunity that opened that we put the concept of climate risk through, and said there’s another risk that’s not been adequately disclosed to you, and it actually has major financial implications for these companies and therefore your portfolios. . . . And we just asserted that and did our best to back it up with various lawyers and legal people . . . and we certainly popularised that term and kept repeating it, and now it’s a commonplace term.

(Callison, 2014, p. 225)

This coining and dissemination of “climate risk” can be understood as a central act of boundary work carried out by Ceres. While this semantic shift was crucial, the organisation’s efforts extended well beyond terminological innovation. Ceres responded to a key translation challenge: the scientific discourse on climate change lacked resonance in the epistemic and institutional frameworks of finance and corporate governance. Worse still, the authority of climate science itself was being actively contested in public and political arenas. Faced with this, Ceres sought to reframe “climate change” in a way that would make it intelligible and actionable within the finance sector. This involved a repositioning of climate change from a primarily environmental and social concern to a matter of corporate accountability and risk management. As one board member noted: “Then it was not a social or environmental issue. It was a corporate governance issue” (Callison, 2014, p. 225). Through this reframing, the problem of climate change was translated into a financial risk narrative. In this narrative, the focus shifted to the protection of

investments and the exposure of companies to liability in the face of environmental disasters. Climate change thus has been rendered relevant “on a distinct epistemological terrain” (Callison, 2014, p. 205).

Callison emphasises that when climate change has been translated into climate risk, many concerns central to climate science lost their salience: “Investors are ‘not interested in the details’ of the science and are not likely to be sceptics. Rather, they want to know what it means for their financial liabilities and risks as investors and corporate executives” (Callison, 2014, p. 205). To become relevant to the finance community, the concept of anthropogenic global warming had to be articulated in an entirely different register. This transfer across epistemic boundaries necessitated a reconfiguration of the concept itself. It was not merely a relabelling but a deeper reframing of meaning: a different term – “climate risk” – with distinct connotations had to be employed in order to preserve a core concern while rendering it intelligible within a new evaluative logic.

In the case of Ceres, the translation did not evolve by itself, but it was the outcome of an effortful and long-lasting translational work. Considering learning, it is important to highlight that this translational work was understood by the actors themselves as a form of education. One informant from Ceres explained: “So we came up with the idea of linking a new concept of climate change to an old concept of risk and doing the scaffolding or whatever theorists call the ways that people learn new things” (Callison, 2014, p. 224).

Learning, as it is commented in this statement, does not follow the logic of gradually shifting participation from peripheral to more central positions within a community of practice. It is not about turning board members of companies and pension funds into apprentice climate scientists by introducing them to the theoretical and empirical intricacies of global warming. Instead, Ceres pursued a different approach to facilitate learning. They addressed actors already occupying central positions within the financial community and introduced new ways of communicating what matters within that domain. This form of relating different social contexts does not centre on negotiating the participation status of individual actors within an otherwise stable framework of relevance. Rather, the horizon of meaning itself is shifted by introducing a new object of reference: climate risk. This object becomes addressable because it resembles existing elements within the financial domain – it is framed as a form of risk. At the same time, it points to issues that had previously lacked relevance for this epistemic community. The translation and incorporation of the concept of *climate change* thus have direct consequences for how members of the financial economy relate to the world and to one another. Such translations clearly affect how individuals participate in the involved communities. Both newcomers and established members may experience learning through this process. What marks the learning event, however, is not a change in the position of individual participants, but a transformation in the framework of relevances. Hence, these dynamics are not limited to individual learning, they involve

inherently collective dimensions. In this sense, accomplishing a translation means altering the existing nexus of doings and sayings (Schatzki, 2002) that constitute a given practice. Learning through translation necessarily entails elements of collective learning, as it requires shifts in the shared use of language and in the links between actions and expressions that make up a practice.

Learning in a situation of third-space interaction: Collaboration in a gamification project

The third type of translation relation I examine in this chapter is *third-space interaction*. While the previous – *cross-boundary participation* and *cross-boundary communication* – presuppose an established context into which something or someone enters, third-space interactions bring together participants and ideas from multiple origins without a predefined shared framework. In such constellations, participants' statuses are shaped precisely by the heterogeneity of their backgrounds: none can be considered insiders. Likewise, no body of knowledge can be assumed to be self-evident in the situation. Instead, a key premise of these interactions is that the knowledge that participants draw upon and relate to differs in substantive ways. This creates a distinctive setting in which learning develops through active co-construction of newly emerging common ground.

The dynamics of learning in such situations of third-space interaction are illustrated by the case of an emerging field of practice centred on shared references to the idea of gamifying instructional settings. Game mechanics – such as engaging narratives, competitive elements (e.g., leader boards), and continuous rewards (e.g., points and badges) – are expected to foster more effective and convenient forms of instruction (Chou, 2015). Drawing on interviews with professionals in this field, Claudia Friedrich (2025) shows that dealing with diverse perspectives and conceptual ambiguity is considered a constitutive challenge within this domain.⁴ Establishing gamified learning arrangements is perceived as a complex endeavour that demands a wide range of knowledge and skills drawn from fields such as game design, business consulting, psychology, education, programming, and marketing. Experts in this field, therefore, emphasise the need for collaboration among individuals with diverse backgrounds. One informant expressed it this way: “That’s basically always a good thing, when you have a team, um, that has different areas of focus but also overlaps – so that they can talk to each other, you know, or learn how to” (Friedrich, 2023, p. 25f).

The informant addresses the challenges involved in assembling a team for successful gamification projects, emphasising both the productive potential of diverse expertise and the necessity of shared common ground. In this view, differences provide unique perspectives and enrich discussions, while commonalities are essential for mutual understanding. It is noted that team members often initially struggle to understand one another, which necessitates an ongoing learning process. Although a basic level of mutual understanding is required from the start, deeper and more

nuanced commonalities are expected to develop over time to facilitate collaboration. The emergence of such learning cannot be taken for granted; it requires deliberate preparations to manage misunderstandings which, while not entirely foreseeable, occur regularly. Consequently, special efforts are made to manage the diversity of perspectives, and the translational work involved is often described as both challenging and burdensome.

That the vocabu – that the vocabulary from gamification and from games is already a completely different one, that's sometimes difficult. You first have to explain that as well – that the different units,/the different departments want different things, one wants this, the next one wants that, then one has the technical interpretation, the other has the information. These are the kinds of communication gaps that are actually a huge hurdle.

(Friedrich, 2023, 151f)

As the variety of interests, interpretations, and information is regarded as a fundamental asset, no one can claim to represent the norm; instead, each participant is expected to contribute a distinctive set of semiotic resources. To harness this diversity effectively, it is regarded as essential to foster a shared awareness that differences among participants are inherent, that a sense of alienation is not only common but expected. While marked differences can be managed, misunderstandings often arise when they remain unacknowledged (see also Dinkelaker & Stimm, 2023). Team members might initially believe they are discussing the same topic, only to realise later that they were referring to very different phenomena. Much of the work required to achieve the team's goals involves identifying variations in language use and establishing mutual comprehension across these distinct vernaculars. In other words, the work undertaken in such interprofessional teams is inherently translational.

In a way, situations of third-space interaction (see also Bhabha, 2004; Fuchs, 2023) merge elements of cross-boundary communication and cross-boundary participation: individuals engage as outsiders within the host community as ideas originating from diverse contexts are introduced. However, third-space interactions differ in one key respect. While cross-boundary participations and communications typically assume that a common language and shared understanding exist within the community at hand, third-space settings are characterised by the absence of such taken-for-granted commonality. In fact, the taken-for-granted assumption of a common ground is itself seen as problematic, as it may lead to misunderstandings. The case of multi-professional teams provides a vivid example of such translation relations in which a new boundary is drawn around participants who all come from outside. Diversity is deliberately sought to transcend the limitations of the worldviews rooted in specific communities of practice (Whitchurch, 2023). The merging of perspectives is seen as a distinct learning outcome – often identified as a key objective, yet which also

emerges as an inherent by-product of the interactions. This openness of third spaces is yet limited temporally. Either these spaces consolidate into more established communities of practice, with defined standards and entrenched roles of participation, or they dissolve as individuals eventually return to the communities to which they originally belong.

Learning through translation reveals yet another dimension in situations of third-space interaction. In these contexts, the process is neither about adjusting the relationship between newcomers and an established epistemic community nor about integrating novel ideas into an existing framework. Rather, learning emerges as the moment in which a new frame of meaning is co-constructed – one that renders perspectives originating from different communities mutually intelligible and relevant. This process entails fluid participation statuses and continuous negotiation of what is considered significant within the evolving context.

Comparative Analysis: Translation, Participation, and Learning in Cross-Boundary Interactions

The three situations examined in detail above represent distinct configurations of how different epistemic communities are brought into relation: entering a new community while drawing on prior expertise (*cross-boundary participation*), recontextualising a concept from one epistemic context within another (*cross-boundary communication*), and jointly engaging with a task from distinct epistemic backgrounds (*third-space interaction*). They illustrate distinct modes in which translation, participation, and learning become interwoven. Each configuration frames the relationship between epistemic difference and learning in a specific way.

In situations of *cross-boundary participation*, translation takes the form of personal adjustment: individuals move into new epistemic communities, bringing knowledge from divergent contexts. Learning here manifests as a process of navigating and gradually aligning with the norms and epistemic frameworks of the new environment. The challenge lies in balancing previous forms of expertise with the expectations and practices of the incorporating context.

In contrast, situations of *cross-boundary communication* centre not on persons but on concepts: knowledge objects travel between social worlds and must be translated in such a way that they become intelligible and actionable in the receiving domain. The impact on participation is more indirect – learning occurs not through integration into a new community, but through reconfiguring meaning so that it resonates with a different set of relevances. Here, translation primarily operates at the level of conceptual reframing.

Situations of *third-space interaction*, by comparison, involve neither a pre-established community nor a defined context of integration. Instead, participants from different backgrounds engage with one another on equal footing, without shared assumptions or stable reference points. Learning emerges through the joint

construction of provisional common ground, and translation becomes an inherently reciprocal and improvisational practice. The instability of roles and categories in these situations makes learning both more open-ended and more contingent.

Despite these differences, several shared features can be observed across all three configurations. First, translation always involves a creative negotiation of relevance: what counts as meaningful or valid is not predetermined but has to be constructed in relation to diverging contexts of meaning. Second, learning is consistently tied to participation – not as a linear trajectory, but as an ongoing and situated process shaped by social positioning, mutual recognition, and evolving practices. Third, all three configurations highlight the epistemic productivity of difference: it is not despite, but because of the coexistence of divergent knowledge frameworks that learning becomes possible.

Learning by translation can thus be understood as a form of boundary work in which epistemic differences are not overcome or resolved but actively navigated. This navigation reshapes both knowledge and participation, enabling individuals and collectives to relate across discontinuities. What varies between the three configurations is how this navigation is structured – whether through role transitions, conceptual reframing, or joint meaning-making without fixed roles. What unites them is a shared commitment to engaging with difference as a productive condition for learning. In this light, translation is not merely a matter of linguistic or conceptual transfer but a situated social practice that mediates between different epistemic horizons (Thompson, 2017; Straub, 2023; Dinkelaker & Wenten, 2024).

Outlook: A Comparative Approach to Understanding Learning in Situations of Epistemic Plurality

The comparative analysis presented in this chapter has demonstrated how adult learning can emerge in constellations where different epistemic frameworks intersect. By examining three distinct types of cross-boundary exchange, the concept of *learning by translation* has been explored as a means of understanding how learning unfolds at the boundaries between epistemic communities.

Each of the three configurations illustrates a particular way in which epistemic differences are made relevant and negotiated. In *cross-boundary participation*, learning occurs as individuals bring prior expertise into new communities and redefine their status through translation. In *cross-boundary communication*, learning emerges when concepts migrate between knowledge contexts and acquire new relevance. In *third-space interactions*, shared understanding is not given a priori but is co-constructed out of the diversity of participants' backgrounds, generating novel frameworks of meaning. What these cases have in common is that learning is not simply the outcome of adaptation but of active boundary work.

What can be drawn from this examination is the need for a comparative analytical framework – one that focuses not only on how learning occurs within a given epistemic horizon but also on how the conditions of knowledge production

and participation shift when such horizons are brought into relation. This approach requires methodological attention to the microdynamics of interaction, including the marking of difference, the framing of relevance, and the negotiation of participation statuses.

This perspective is particularly relevant when it comes to understanding the conditions of contemporary adult learning, as we are witnessing an ongoing diversification of epistemic contexts and an increase in scenarios where the plurality of and the interrelations between these contexts are addressed. In an era of superdiversity (Vertovec, 2021), translations are still gaining prominence. On the one hand, differences between community-based perspectives become more accentuated (Butler, 2000, Clemens, 2020; Fritzsche, 2025) and on the other hand, the imperative to articulate bridges between these differences grows more urgent (Dinkelaker et al., 2020). Situations of epistemic plurality are not exceptional, but increasingly characteristic of professional, educational, and civic contexts in complex societies. Accordingly, understanding how learning happens across differences becomes essential for education theory, practice, and policy. In many contexts, learning through translation appears no longer as an exceptional occurrence but as a recurring, expected phenomenon. The concept of *learning by translations* offers a way to conceptualise these processes without reducing them to models of acculturation or assimilation. Instead, it centres the relational and often fragile work of creating temporary shared ground in spite of enduring differences.

Future research will benefit from deepening the empirical basis for this perspective. More comparative case studies are needed to refine the typology of translational learning and to trace how different social, institutional, and cultural settings enable or constrain it. In this regard, *learning by translation* is not only a descriptive lens but also a conceptual invitation to rethink the interdependence of knowledge, participation, and learning in diverse and contested worlds.

Notes

- 1 The case has been described and discussed in the paper “Kommunikation von Lernen. Theoretischer Zugang und empirische Beobachtungen” (“Communicating learning: Theoretical approach and empirical observations”) (Dinkelaker, 2007). The situation was observed in the context of the empirical study “Umgang mit Wissen in Sozialen Welten” (“The Handling of Knowledge in Social Worlds”) (Kade & Seitter, 2006). The study aimed to comparatively examine the social processes of knowledge transmission and acquisition within a company providing industrial services on the one hand and a social service organisation for the homeless on the other.
- 2 Regarding the conditional relevance of assumed knowledge statuses of participants cf. Dinkelaker, 2008, Drew, 2018
- 3 For readers who are likely not familiar with the specific terminology of real estate management, a brief explanation may be helpful: the company leases properties to other companies over long periods of time. These properties are referred to as leasehold estates and must be registered in the official land register (“cadastre”). The process of “quarrying out” is as a preparatory step for this registration.
- 4 This case study was developed within the framework of the doctoral research group “Mediation and Translation in Transition”, between 2021 and 2025 at Martin Luther

University Halle-Wittenberg. The interdisciplinary programme – encompassing sociology, linguistics, business administration, and educational science – conducted empirically grounded comparative analyses of mediation and translation relations in various social contexts (Dinkelaker, 2023; Dinkelaker & Wenten, 2024; Dinkelaker & Wrana, 2025). The dissertation by Claudia Friedrich, from which the interview excerpts discussed here are drawn, explores how conceptions of instruction are articulated within the social world of gamification practitioners and how differing understandings of instruction are negotiated within that context.

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PART III

Conceptual and Methodological Approaches to Learning



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8

A PSYCHO-SOCIETAL APPROACH TO ADULT LEARNING AT THE NEXUS BETWEEN LIFE COURSE, WORK, AND SOCIETAL TRANSITION

Henning Salling Olesen

Already when a group of researchers initiated the conference series “Researching Work and Learning” more than 20 years ago, the challenge was set:

the relation between the constituents of the field and the scope of the research field are [wisely] left open to a multitude of approaches and ideas. . . . But there is also a need to rethink the relation between [them].

(Weber & Salling Olesen, 2001)

The modern age of industrial capitalism separated work and learning in individual lives and re-connected them in instrumental relationships where capital used a workforce trained in advance for its purposes. But by the turn of the millennium, new relationships were emerging – lifelong learning, retraining, learning *within* working life – mainly as a result of a radical change in the relationship between the life cycle and the transformation cycle of work in what we might call the late-capitalist or post-industrial phase of modernity (European Commission, 2001; Rubenson, 1996; Unesco, 2015; Evans et al., 2021). Transitions in individual lives have various causes, some of which are “brute facts” (health; aging), but they increasingly have to do with the social dynamics that change work (OECD, 2016; Billett et al., 2023). One or several major transitions are now common in an adult’s working life, resulting either from technological changes, changing employment structures, or workers’ own re-orientations. This general changeability is now a condition of life. Lifelong learning has become subject-constituent.

In this chapter, I present a psycho-societal approach (PSA) to understanding learning in this changing object (society)-subject-object (work) relationship. It is a way to explore how learning takes place in the dialectic intersection between societal transformations and the subjective dynamics of individual lives. Transcending

the separation of subjectivity from material historical context – a kind of Cartesian original sin – makes way for a materialist concept of the ongoing reconstruction of subjectivity. That is what the psycho-societal approach to adult learning is about, emphasising the (macro-)societal context of subjectivity as well as social relations in general.

First, I show how PSA developed out of critical educational research and then briefly present the methodology and theory applied here. Finally, I provide an example of the nexus between life history, work, and learning developed in an ongoing research project.

The Subject Perspective in Educational Research

The academic division between a philosophical pedagogy, which validates pedagogy and institutional agency, and an objectifying view of the embeddedness of education institutions and processes in social structures becomes problematic when we attempt to think critically and politically about education and learning. For those of us in the adult and vocational education research group at Roskilde University, this problem led to a cross fertilisation of two elements. One was a critical commitment to the use of learning in labour market policy, with the aim of reintegrating unemployed people into the labour market through relevant retraining. This approach had limited success, so we developed an alternative strategy simply focusing on the experiences and resources of the unemployed, as marginalised wage workers or reserve army of labour. This did not lessen the exclusionary tendency of the capitalist labour market, but for quite a few people, it meant a more realistic understanding of their situation and the possibility of action based on material reality. The second element was related to a democratic, experience-based political education: how can ordinary experiences of capitalist everyday life be translated into political agency? How is a social subject established? Oskar Negt's ideas about exemplary learning were largely responsible for bringing this challenge to academics engaged in trade unionism and worker education (Zeuner, 2013). Inspired by critical theory, Negt argued that the core theoretical concepts were *everyday life* and *experience* (Negt, 2001) and that understanding life experiences as both products of and prerequisites for learning processes can lead to changing social practice.

With the aim of understanding learning processes from the perspectives of the specific learner subjects, we found methodological inspiration in life history and social science biographical research which is politically legitimate and pedagogically innovative because it gives the learner a voice. We have since used autobiographical interviews to create data in a number of empirical projects, from one of the first of which a psycho-social interpretation emerged from the empirical material. It was an action research project (officially tagged P47) whose focus on the life history of the participants went hand-in-hand with the rationale of the education programme itself. Until now, the findings have been

published mostly in Danish (Larsen, 1992; Ramsøe & Salling Olesen, 1991; Salling Olesen, 1994, 2004).

From the beginning, P47 was an equal opportunity project, one of a number of guidance and training projects specially designed for women who had recently been through a long period of unemployment. It was a one-year course of basic education and vocational training in sectors for which employment prospects seemed promising. As a systematic experiment for large-scale implementation, it was an integral part of official labour market policy. As well as providing specific training for specific employment fields, the experiment adopted observations from the pedagogical and organisational experiences of careers counselling and education projects organised by women's organisations whose aim was to build women's self-confidence and to provide a basis for personal development.

The project was successful in the sense that the women thrived and gained self-confidence. However, what made these experiences interesting in a wider context was that the programme was also successful on the employment criterion. Many attempts to solve labour market problems through education and training resulted in very low rates of direct employment. Program P47 broke this pattern. The women found jobs at a much higher rate than in other such labour market schemes. It also seemed that a good proportion of the jobs were better than "just any job", namely ones they had been trained for, an important achievement in this segment of the labour market (Larsen, 1992). In follow-up interviews 10 years later, the same women confirmed this positive picture (Larsen et al., 2002).

Why has this programme been more successful than others? No one measure can make sense of the figures; rather, a complex set of factors works both together and against each other. When we asked employers for their views, it was striking how much they emphasised social competences and personal characteristics. The technical skills are basic and necessary, but their reasons for appreciating individual employees were expressed in social and personal terms. The data are highly interpretable, but they suggest a close connection, an intertwining, among the factors that facilitate women's success in the labour market and the factors that make the education a valuable and engaging experience for them. So, we had to look deeper; we conducted individual qualitative interviews to understand the subjective aspect of both the learning process and the women's labour market situation.

One of the women we interviewed, Linda, not only improved her self-confidence during her transport and logistics training, but also dramatically changed her ideas about what "work" could be. There is a connection between these aspects: in the interview Linda talked in detail about her relationships with her husband and her mother. Her relationships with other women and her husband changed during the education period, like a kind of adolescence development, in her own words: "at least I think I have become more adult by following this course . . . yes, more independent, I do think so, you know better to make decisions and to speak up, saying that's how I want it to be" (Larsen et al., 1992, p. 36). She felt she gradually was able to face her husband as an equal, and that it was the education and work

competence that enabled this change. Linda also gradually learned the possibility of communicating with other women, beyond being a daughter to her mother who had died recently.

These were not simply “private” developments. They were intertwined with the development of her work identity and of her ideas about work. She participated in two very different trainee experiences. One was learning to be a truck driver, which is far beyond a woman’s usual repertoire and for Linda was really “something special” that impressed her husband and her young son, transcending the gender boundary as it did. For her, it was a new social identity. The other work experience was a calm and family-like work group in a storehouse.

We interpreted Linda recounting of these training experiences together with her gradually changing self-understanding as those of a woman reflecting on her previous work experiences. She had had a traditional but quite happy experience as a maid in a private home – she felt appreciated and socially integrated there. However, she did not until now see this period as “real work”. Her real work history is one of the trivial women’s labour market histories, including unskilled industry jobs, part-time cleaning in a school when her child was young, etc. In this period, she had, like most unskilled women, suffered the contradictory feeling of being a bad mother in order to maintain a lousy job. The trucker experience corresponded to her concept of real labour, as does her new self-confidence. She now feels like a real worker, also in her family relationships. The storehouse was different. It was clearly real paid work, but it also reminded her of family and close personal relations. It contributed to a reinterpretation of her experiences as a housemaid and into a new consciousness of how work environments might be – that is, a reconciliation of some of her relational experiences as an unskilled, working-class woman and her new self as a skilled worker. As a result, she chose a career in the storehouse and is employed in it.

Analysis of Linda’s story as well as other cases reveals that her learning was intertwined with individual psycho-dynamic processes; for example, the relationships with her mother and husband seem quite important for both regressive and progressive elements in the story. The point is not to know the exact truth about this individual woman, but to provide a deeper understanding of learning and work identity. Understanding the individual story in the context of a woman’s socialisation and typical relationship to the labour market, we may interpret the possible meanings of her actions, plans, and feelings as aspects of an identity process.

In education research, (auto)biographical life history narratives are a common empirical strategy, wherein interviewees are invited to present their (retrospective) understanding of their life course (Alheit, 1994; Alheit & Dausien, 1985; Salling Olesen, 2007; Schuller & Watson, 2009). The analysis does justice to the resulting narrative as a unique subjective reality. That is, it can be seen as an authentic (re)production and (re)construction of the interviewee’s learning process through life, and thus the biographical self-narrative is a learning process in itself (Alheit & Dausien, 2002).

In the P47-project it appeared that relative success in a capitalist labour market was based on the liberation of women's own experiences and strengths in producing new worker identities and self-confidence. Learning specific skills that proved useful in "real work", meeting the traditional demands for an easily recycled labour force, while at the same time feeling (more) in command of their own lives. For the women, the process represents both a progression in personal identity and a historical progress (in learning to cope with the labour market). They were all women with double responsibilities, as workers and homemakers, and from this life situation they gain experiences that help them to process the ambiguities that arise from being positioned at the edge of the labour market. Whereas their previous experiences show a limited and instrumental engagement in work, during this project many of them had work experiences that rewarded (and demanded) more personal and knowledgeable engagement. In this they found that some of their experiences as women became valuable work qualifications.

The capacity to sustain ambiguity and ambivalence seems to be important. In their previous careers they had experienced a dichotomy between traditional female domains and coping with the labour market and its demands for qualifications. During the learning processes in the one-year combined education and work practices, they realised that some of female competences were rather a resource, also in work. The women in our research project obtain their full and real citizenship by adapting to a capitalist labour market – they are modern women – but their subjective learning stories also tell of the potential for a more comprehensive work identity, that affords a sense of human quality of work, and the awareness of the continuing potential conflicts between being a good worker and being a good parent and partner.

The P47 data show empirically the entanglement between a societal aspect of work and gender, and a psychodynamic aspect of relationships and emotional involvement. It provided an impulse to work more systematically with the psychodynamic aspects of everyday life experiences, questioning the usual binary between (individual) subject and society in most education and learning research. The adoption of the biographical approach to education research was politically motivated by the desire to give a voice to the voiceless. But it was also seen as a way to raise the theoretical issues involved in the understanding of the learner subject (Salling Olesen, 2023, pp. 103–104). I have given a more detailed genealogical account of this methodological development in adult education handbooks (Salling Olesen, 2016, 2017).

Biographical data can be treated differently. The French sociologist Daniel Bertaux uses biographical data material as a mirror of social conditions and historical developments, and finds the subjective meaningfulness less interesting or even systematically limited (Bertaux, 1981). Metaphorically, he distinguishes between the flame and the flares of the light grenades used in wartime to illuminate the battlefield: the biography can either be seen as an interesting flame in itself, or as a light illuminating the landscape. This is a stimulating distinction yet ultimately a

false binary: the two dimensions cannot be so easily separated. In a large Australian project investigating the significance of learning in different formats for Australian workers who are trying to sustain their employability during individual transitions of different kinds (Billett et al., 2023), biographical data are used to understand that learning has been essential for maintaining employability, and how. The narrative data offer insights into the subjective learning processes of individual workers who have experienced the flares, and at the same time illuminate the essentially market-driven nature of the Australian labour market, whose little institutional regulation (the landscape) determines the conditions of employability.

Pierre Bourdieu has, from a slightly different epistemological point of view, also criticised the biographical approach for accepting the subjects' immediate self-understandings and, therefore, offering but systematically limited insights into the relationship between subjective self-understanding and the social context of learning (Bourdieu, 1986). This critique is anchored in his theory of practice, where the immediate self-understanding must be understood in the light of a subjective engagement in a social field, "illusio", that does not recognise the structural conditions of the field (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986). In this critique we also see two different, indeed diametrically opposed, concepts of the subject. On the one hand, a culturalist biographical tradition that has since been shown to have an affinity with constructivism in psychology and social science, and, on the other hand, an understanding of subjects through their material practice, which are for Bourdieu grounded in objective social conditions. British researchers in the "Learning Lives" project tried to embrace and harmonise biography research and practice research without really resolving this underlying contradiction (Biesta et al., 2008). However, it seems possible to develop the concept of material practice further by understanding the production of the subject of practice psycho-socially. While Bourdieu criticised the lack of objective social realism in biography research, his own concept of subjectivity has been criticised for failing to theorise the subject (Aarseth, 2016), and he himself is aware of the gap that is left in the theories of practice, paying (distant) respect to psychoanalysis (Bourdieu, 2000; Reay, 2015). The psycho-societal approach developed at Roskilde University and elsewhere seeks to bridge this gap by theorising the material origins and ongoing transformations of the subject in social interaction. This approach is indebted to these discussions (Salling Olesen, 2018; Salling Olesen & Weber, 2012), but also to a Marxist emphasis on the historical change of work and the external dynamics it imposes on subjective learning processes.

The psycho-societal approach shares with other approaches a common hermeneutic endeavour to understand subjects and subjective agency. Most often, this position is associated with a solidarity with the people involved in the research. It was a starting point for critical educational research in social intervention to lift those affected out of the objectification or reification that is often a consequence of a state intervention. Moreover, the Australian employability project shared the intention of foregrounding the individual learners' perspectives. Nevertheless,

when we reach a position that contests, or perhaps transcends and expands, the immediately solidaristic reading of subjective statements (and agency), it is an expression of what has been termed, especially in literary text reading, the *hermeneutics of suspicion*, a concept attributed to Paul Ricoeur (Busacchi, 2016): this is the idea that a text contains an understanding not known to its author and that, therefore, in addition to reading with empathy, one must also look for these hidden or latent meanings. Transferred to our context, this means that the learner subjects who tell their life story do not necessarily know its entire social meaning.

Theorising Subjectivity

Our insistence on insights from Marxism and psychoanalysis led us to an ideology-critical social analysis and to a recognition of the importance of unconscious psycho-dynamics in the subject which justifies the “suspicion”. In the empirical method, this means prioritising detailed and situated data – including, for example, autobiographical interviews – which in turn enable an open interpretation. The interpretation must be based on respectful analysis but also transcend it by drawing out possible additional meanings, which may be counter to the understanding suggested by the immediate analysis or that the interviewee has. It is crucial to emphasise that neither Marxism nor psychoanalysis is thereby assigned the status of definitive and overdetermining truths. On the contrary, the development of an interpretation methodology is but a stepping stone to critical discussions of these “grand theories” including critical discussion of Marxism’s ambiguous concepts of subjectivity, and of a version of psychoanalysis which, in contrast to Freud’s, for example, sees psycho-dynamics as the result of social interaction.

A methodologically decisive impulse for us was the German psychoanalyst Alfred Lorenzer’s analysis of the social meaning of cultural material by psychoanalytic interpretation (Lorenzer & König, 1986). The interpretation model, in-depth hermeneutic cultural analysis, never became mainstream, but a group of German researchers led by Thomas Leithäuser used it in empirical research in work psychology (Leithäuser, 1976; Leithäuser et al., 1977; Leithäuser & Volmerg, 1988), and in research into the consciousness of everyday life and learning. Our research group in Roskilde applied it to critical transitions that disrupt everyday practice and pose challenges or enforce changes for individuals (Weber, 2000; Kirsten Weber, 2020). Work and career have usually been the context, and the central research questions have been related to the subjective dimension: the experience of everyday life practice, the importance of life experiences to how challenges are handled, the tension between forced adaptation and active agency, and the location of learning processes as responses to and prerequisites for this. We have been particularly concerned with the fields of tension in life experience which can either lead to subordination to existing social practices or to learning that enables new practices under certain circumstances. The analytical ambition is to understand actual societal processes and potential alternatives by way of detailed qualitative analysis of

selected individual or microsocial data that may lead to the discovery of contradictory experiences and latent motives. Central to this interpretation procedure that Lorenzer called in-depth hermeneutics was a *scenic understanding* of texts and other artefacts, as expressions of and within holistic experiences. The assumption is that the subjective experience integrates all situational and relational aspects in a scenic “Gestalt” to which we may gain access through careful interpretation of its manifestations. The term psycho-societal approach was generated in order to avoid certain reductive misunderstandings of the term “depth” in psychoanalytical thought. Interpretation is rather a widening of the search for potential meaning. The discussion between fractions of psychoanalytically inspired communities and the reasons for talking about “societal” rather than “social” have been dealt with in a 20-year-long methodological practice and in a number of publications. For a short version relating more directly to learning issues see Salling Olesen (2017, 2021).

Lorenzer’s in-depth hermeneutic interpretation was not the first application of psychoanalytic methods to art material. But it is distinguished from many others by its foundation in a strictly material understanding of the subject’s formation and later development, based on his much earlier materialist socialisation theory (Lorenzer, 1972). This is a socio-historical critique of the development theory of psychoanalysis. It is a theory of the formation of the subject through their experiences of social interaction in the first years of life, and then the development of symbolic interaction forms through the acquisition of language. What is crucial is that traces of interaction experiences are bodily embedded. They appear in the form of scenic wholes, interweaving emotional and cognitive and social experiences.

The materialist nature of the theory lies in the relationship between societal context and psychic development through interaction. Lorenzer was originally a psychiatrist, and his socialisation theory deals with the understanding of a successful establishment of the relationship between inner psyche and social reality as well as possible damage to or collapse of this relationship, and we must note that not all experiences find expression in language (Lorenzer, 1970). It seems promising to compare this materialism with its background in a bodily and relational process of experience with Bourdieu’s anthropological understanding of the life-historical basis of the inner “dispositions” that form the subjective logic in social practice, habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). Both theories offer material ways of understanding the subject but with nuances in theorising learning throughout life. The most important element in Lorenzer’s ideas for general learning theory is the dynamic understanding of interaction among forms and symbolisation. The acquisition of language enables the subject to participate in social communities of language use and to symbolise bodily and emotional aspects of sensory, pre-linguistic experience. The capacity to connect social language use and the sensory experience is fundamental in the subjective handling of reality – that is, for authentic learning in general but particularly for learning skills that depend on theoretical reflection in practical work, which is true for most work skills. But it is precisely the link between

the language use and the generally more comprehensive bodily and emotional experiences that makes it the decisive starting point for theory about learning processes. All learning is in principle a reorganisation of a symbolic universe that may be socially well-defined through language games (theoretical knowledge) but at the same time is dependent on its foundation in individual sensory experience. This is particularly relevant and visible in a professional field where there is direct interplay between formal professional knowledge and bodily and relational practice, namely care work.

Care Workers' Experiences

Here, it will be helpful to give an example of a psycho-societal approach to care work because on the one hand it seems to expose the relationship between language use and sensory experience in a fundamental and everlasting way and at on the other exposes the relationship between societal transitions and individual experiences and learning.

In a Norwegian research project, "Caring Future," at Stavanger University that deals with ethical issues that will likely arise in the future in the health and care sector from technological developments, I participate in a sub-project on elderly care workers' "self-understanding and ideals in technology-mediated work" (Ramvi, 2020). The technology discussion is a proxy for a discussion about the essential quality of care and changing working conditions. Just below the surface is the observation that the capacities to care, empathise, and show compassion seem closely related to gender. But how? The debate is heated and normative on a general level that often escapes empirical arguments.

In a psycho-societal framework we see the capacity to care as a result of social learning, an aspect of a cultural identity, and a bodily reality reproduced in individual experiences. While recognising the close connection between gender and emotional dispositions and caring practices, it tries to understand the historical situatedness and subjective dynamic in these practices. We investigate this through a hermeneutic interpretation of life history interviews (Finholt-Pedersen, 2020; Salling Olesen, 2020b). Ten nurses working in elderly care were interviewed, with a focus on their experiences with technology. In general, they are not very interested in technology. They often slide into prevailing discourses about elderly care policy that are dominated by talk of technology: they refer to the aging challenge in the years to come, which will require greater capacities, and to the argument that technology improves the possibilities for elderly people to live in their own homes. Most nurses do not see themselves as subjects in this development; they tend to apply a systemic perspective. They talk about technology with "a general vagueness in everyday communication" based on an apparently common but not particularly explicit understanding (Finholt-Pedersen, 2024; Weber, 1995). There seems to be a certain reification in their language, detached from their everyday experiences.

When, on the other hand, the nurses talk about their own experiences of caring, they are very concrete. They mention individual patients, often emphasising their difficulties: who needs extensive care to manage basic needs as personal hygiene and nutrition? Who must be looked after day and night? In these discussions, they express views that welfare technologies do not match the care needs of their specific patients. Only some patients are said to benefit from GPS (satellite location systems), for example, as many are incapable of leaving the house or nursing home, or are too cognitively impaired to use medicine dispensers.

The nurses describe a finely tuned relationship with their individual patients. They explain that they care for different patients in different ways, based on the individual's emotional and medical needs, and their life situation, on a very practical level.

The linguistic discrepancy between the managerial perspective and the concrete care experiences appears not only in relation to technology. The nurses also adopt the managerial term "hands" when talking about the lack of resources, a term that seems to obscure the real need for care qualifications. When the nurses are more explicitly describing their competencies in care work, they do not refer to themselves as hands. They describe what they do.

Communication about time and time constraints is also interesting. The nurses often talk about lack of time as a threat to their ability to care for their patients according to their professional understanding of what it means to be a nurse. Time constraints in various situations are related to care for patients' emotional and social needs and their life situations, which cannot be covered within the strictly limited instructions for each patient. The nurses spend considerable time finding a balance among their different patients' needs and then divide up their time to meet these needs. They mostly regret the lack of time and advocate for the provision of more comprehensive and personal care.

"Time" appears as a multiple symbol – often describing a real stress factor but also more generally a feeling of reification and dissatisfaction, a negative expression of the view that their ideas about care are better. Time can be seen as the exchange value in care work. According to managerial logic it is the most important parameter, but in the experience-related language of the care workers it is sometimes the name for a simple stress factor; in a language derived from union and collective agreement it sometimes becomes a common denominator for care quality and staff thriving, often connected with talk about "hands." There seems to be a collective defensiveness in the continuing complaints about the lack of time, but also a kind of reverse expression of a feeling of insufficiency in relation to their professional ambitions. And these feelings do not exclude one another.

These observations gain meaning in a psycho-societal approach. The relationship between concrete experiences and language is pivotal for the understanding of work experiences and communication about them. According to Lorenzer, early interaction with the mother (i.e., the primary care person(s)) leaves inner forms of sensory experience that remain active in later experiences of the world. When a

child later acquires language, it establishes symbolic interaction forms, connecting its individual prelinguistic sensory experiences with the social interaction and the social relations that lend meaning to language (language games in Wittgenstein's concepts). Some of the early prelinguistic interaction forms – experienced during the separation of mother (i.e., primary caring person(s)) and child – are embodied experiences of mutual dependence and care. We may assume that this emotional experience is kept alive or reactivated in concrete caring relations in family love relationships. Eventually they form a relational repertoire that nurses and other care workers recur to when they perform caring duties in their professional lives. We can trace these resources in the concrete and personalised descriptions of caring relations in the interviews (Salling Olesen & Findal-Petersen, n.d.).

Professionalisation – An Ongoing Societal Process

A constant theme when the nurses describe their specific caring relationships is their belief that the complexities and diversity of these relationships are not properly recognised. We can see this as a critique of management and regulations but also as a defence against not having their own language in which to discuss the relationships appropriately.

Instead of generalising relational experiences, they talk about their clinical nursing gaze, and their professional experience, enabling a nuanced evaluation of an individual patient's condition, and they are particularly insistent on the importance of direct physical contact. Responsibility for the individual patient and the consciousness of a "nurse's gaze" seem to be the backbone in the nurses' claims to professionalism. One of the nurses emphatically declared that her commitment is to "the whole human being behind the patient" – and this seems to express the most generalisable ethical principle among all the nurses interviewed. This concept of holistic care that appears to represent the professional standard is operationalised as personal relationships with the many diverse individual receivers of care. We can see this as a manifestation of a human maturity but it may also represent a caution about generalising, which in turn may represent uncertainty and an unspoken feeling of moving into unknown territory if one goes beyond the intuitive empathic relationship.

These nurses' views of the nature of the care work and their own professional identity can be related societally with the historical processes of modernisation. In the Nordic countries, the general modernisation of society shifted from class-based family care for children, sick and elderly people to public service provision. The most interesting thing about this form of *Vergesellschaftung* (societalisation) is that it transferred not only functions but also much of the workforce from the private sphere of reproduction into institutional labour. And this workforce was and remains predominantly women. What had been women's invisible work in families became paid work they perform in institutions. The development of caring professions was a centuries-long transitional process in which women's interaction

experiences in family relations were gradually extended to and partly transformed by experiences of carrying out care work as employees, as well as in recent decades professional education and the collective organisation of professions.

Training in the caring professions is a transformation of experience from private relationships into competences related to the care needs of patients and clients in institutions. However, paid care is not the same as the spontaneous compassion for and sense of the needs of loved ones. The capacity to care professionally requires a subjective effort of lifelong learning and identification. Lorenzer's theory forms the basis for understanding individual learning as an ongoing interpretation of interaction experiences and reconfiguration of identity from early childhood into adult working life. In a perpetual process, specific individuals, with their life histories, their gender etc., *may become* capable of performing new professional practices by acquiring already existing knowledge and creating their own practices of it (Salling Olesen & Weber, 2001). Establishing a professional identity is a more or less smooth mediation and reconfiguration of life experiences from early childhood onwards, and through work experiences as well as education and training (Salling Olesen, 2020a). In the process, people must also deal with their inabilities in relation to this practice and their doubts about themselves. And whenever complex experiences of realities are digested, not only conscious awareness is active but also unconscious. This is a never-ending story of defences and learning processes, and it has no predetermined outcome in individual practice.

The argument that the existence and development of professions *depend on subjective processes* of learning and identification by individuals can be transformed into an open empirical question for qualitative study of actual situations and their dynamics: How do care workers define their tasks? How do they themselves relate to the everyday situations? The point here is to apply a concept of professional identification that is sensitive to empirical analysis of real, dynamic, subjective processes, rather than a normative one (Salling Olesen, 2003, 2004).

The capacity to care is still clearly gendered, and the development of a professional care capacity must start here. But from a psycho-societal perspective, we do not see it as essential feminine – it is a result of social learning over a very long time. Men can join, but their development of professional competences will depend on their individual life experiences and on the societal development of gender relations.

Care workers' learning processes are exciting, because of the fact that their skills are based on both key life experiences and various forms of formal education and training. The sector is probably facing further professionalisation that will include continued theory-based professional development and an increased use of technologies in the form of artefacts and digitalisation. It will probably involve imposed technology implementation driven by economic rationales. But the result will also depend on care workers' subjective reception and learning processes – they are, like other professional groups, key people in the development

of a societal sector. By making qualitative interpretations of individual interviews, we have illustrated how societal developments unfold on an individual level. We have seen how the tension in a social conflict – in this case the relationship between care work and the institutional management logic of the welfare state – is simultaneously dealt with as a subjective relationship that includes elements of rational professional learning and conscious or unconscious defensive reaction for the individual practitioner. Whether and how technology can contribute to strengthening the care profession depends on some very basic learning processes by the care workers involved.

Learning From Experience Throughout the Life Course

Professional learning, not least in the caring professions, is an exemplary showcase for the dimensions in learning processes, including symbolisation, which is socially well-defined through professional language games (theoretical knowledge) but at the same time connected with individual sensory experience – cognitive as well as emotional and bodily (2020b; Salling Olesen & Weber, 2012). The connection between participation in language communities and sensory experience is fundamental to the subjective handling of reality; in this sense, the capacity to care is a specific case of something general. Caring capacity should not be reduced to either innate, gendered dispositions or simple “ordinary” human relations. Care work is an emerging profession, with specific needs in competence building, theorising and collective learning, but it remains, as do all professions, rooted in the individual embodied experience.

The need for lifelong learning is ubiquitous in late modern life, but it is also specific to each individual and every social context. We have approached this question through life histories in a number of empirical projects about adult learning, work careers, and participation in adult education and training. A main reason for referring to Lorenzer’s theory of socialisation is that it theorises the bodily sensory interaction experience in early life that establishes the connection between sensory interaction experience and language throughout life. Hence this complex link between linguistic, bodily, and emotional experience is a productive starting point for a general theory about learning processes throughout the life course. In order to recognise, connect, and distinguish among emotional and relational experiences in different phases of life and in socially different contexts, the symbolisation, that is, availability of a language rooted in symbolised experiences, is decisive. All learning processes in principle reconfigure the complex of forms of interaction that include both linguistic and sensory experiences. This reconfiguration is at the same time a confirmation or redefinition of a cognitive and emotional sense of self in the world which we can call identity. Insight into these interrelations can enable a more subject-driven management in an environment of rapid development and transitions.

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9

SHAPING OPPORTUNITY SPACES FOR LEARNING

Regimes of Labour Markets and Migration

Michael Bernhard

Adult learning occurs not only in response to teaching but also and in large part through dealing with the lifeworld and its challenges. This has been discussed using the concepts of biographical learning (Hallqvist, 2022), learning in everyday life (Lave, 2019; Lave et al., 2026), and lifelong learning (English & Mayo, 2021; Hof, 2022). Transitions in the life course can serve as an impetus for learning (Hof & Bernhard, 2022, 2025) as they require the individual to engage with challenges at various levels, including dealing with institutions, norms, and discourses (Stauber et al., 2022). Learning outside formal arrangements, however, is not without rules and regulation, tacit and elusive though they might be. When conceptualising learning from a biographical or life course perspective, societal influences are often considered as socio-economic or socio-political factors (see Hof, 2026). One possible way of describing these political arrangements is through the *regime* perspective, which refers to “networks of rules, norms, and procedures that regularise behaviour and control its effects” (Keohane & Nye, 1977, p. 19). Whereas regimes have thus far been fruitfully discussed in the context of international relations (Krasner, 1982), welfare policy (Esping-Andersen, 1990), migration (Horvath et al., 2017), labour markets (Nilsson & Nyström, 2013), and access to adult education and training (Desjardins et al., 2006), this chapter aims to deepen our understanding of adult learning by elaborating on a conceptual relationship between learning and regimes.

This relationship is explored by addressing the influence that regimes may exert on learning processes and going beyond a deterministic notion of regimes by taking the individuals’ engagements with them seriously. In doing so, the chapter builds on the notion that learning is always socially situated and mediated (see Lave et al., 2026). It is argued here that a regime perspective can sensitise to the

complex and contingent interplay of different participants in practices that shape transitions and learning.

After first positioning learning as socially embedded and anchored in the life-world, the regime concept and its applicability to the study of learning, particularly during transitions will be elaborated on. Next, regimes and learning are related through two empirical studies that focus on learning processes in the context of migration and during work-life transitions. Drawing on the perspectives of migration regimes and labour market regimes, the chapter concludes with a discussion of how learning during life course transitions is shaped not only by their wider institutional, political, and societal contexts but also by individuals' engagement with them.

Learning in the Lifeworld and Sites of Practice

Adult learning that takes place outside institutional arrangements has commonly been conceptualised as biographical learning, learning in everyday life, or lifelong learning. From the perspective of biographical learning, as subjects we possess biographicity, which “means that we can redesign again and again, from scratch, the contours of our life within the specific contexts in which we (have to) spend it, and that we experience these contexts as shapeable and designable” (Alheit, 2018, p. 162). Beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge and skills, however, learning in the biographical sense thus appears as a reflexive organising of experience and as an obstinate performance of the subjects (Alheit & Dausien, 2002, p. 20). More precisely,

biographical learning is embedded in lifeworlds that can be analysed under certain conditions as “learning environments” or “learning milieus”. . . . Learning within and through one’s life history is therefore interactive and socially structured, on the one hand, but it also follows its own individual logic that is generated by the specific, biographically layered structure of experience. The biographical structure does not determine the learning process, because it is an open structure that has to integrate the new experience it gains through interacting with the world, with others and with itself.

(Alheit, 2018, p. 162)

Applying the approach of biographical learning to learning through career transitions, Hallqvist points out that “while career transitions regard individuals, research needs to recognize that people are not solitary and isolated but make career transitions in relation to both institutions and other people” (Hallqvist, 2022, p. 370). From a perspective interested in how individuals construct and navigate transitions, learning appears “not only as a temporarily structured process of an individually changed relation to the world, to others, and to oneself . . . but also as a socially embedded phenomenon” (Hof & Bernhard, 2025, p. 15). The focus here is

the interaction of affordances offered by community – broadly understood as also including institutional and societal factors – including personal capacities, intentionality, and processing through which learning, particularly during transitions is shaped (Billett, Choy, et al., 2023, p. 428).

This interaction between affordances and capacities along with their situatedness can be further explored from a practice theoretical perspective. An understanding of learning as “changing participants’ changing participation in (humdrum, complicated, conflictual) everyday practice” (Lave, 2019, p. 1; Lave et al., 2026) reveals the nature of affordances and the relations among different participants in practice. This understanding of learning as part of a social practice brings into focus the social situatedness of activities and the specific configuration of *doings*, *sayings*, and *relatings* (Kemmis, 2021, p. 284) as well as the cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements that enable and constrain how practices can unfold (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 34). This understanding arises from the notion that

practices are not merely set in, but always already shaped by, the particular historical and material conditions that exist in particular localities or sites at particular moments – that is, sites are not a container-like “context” for practices; rather, practices take on shapes at least partly prefigured by the particular, historically-given contents and conditions pertaining at a particular site at a particular moment.

(Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 33, italics in original)

These historical and material conditions thus preconfigure socially available rules of interaction. With an understanding of biographicity as the capacity to redesign the contours of one’s life within specific contexts, and biographical learning as reflexive organising of one’s experiences through interacting with the world, with others and with oneself (Alheit, 2018; Alheit & Dausien, 2002), it is possible to inquire further into the relationship between these rules of interaction and biographical learning: How can these rules, their evolving nature, and their situatedness be conceptualised in a way that aids our understanding of learning?

One theoretical perspective that allows for both the consideration of political-historical conditions for practices as argued by Kemmis et al. and the study of rules of interactions is the regime approach. The next section introduces different notions of the regime concept and explores its applicability to the study of learning, particularly during transitions.

Regime as a Dynamic Interplay of Actors

Originally emerging concept in the research field of international relations, regimes can most broadly be understood as “networks of rules, norms, and procedures that regularise behaviour and control its effects” (Keohane & Nye, 1977, p. 19).

However, as Horvath et al. (2017) point out, the concept of regimes has not been uniformly applied across research domains. Instead, distinct theoretical traditions, each with its own epistemological and ontological assumptions, shape differing understandings of regimes.

In the field of international relations, regimes are understood as “sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors’ expectations converge” (Krasner, 1982, p. 186). This can be seen in international trade agreements, financial market regulations, and environmental treaties, as well as in calls for coordinated global migration governance (Horvath et al., 2017, p. 303). Another strand focuses on primarily intra-national rules and social policy, most notably in the work of Esping-Andersen (1990), who identified three types of welfare state regimes – social democratic, liberal, and conservative – which since have been expanded to reflect more global perspectives (Gough, 1999) by other regimes types such as the “Southern European” (Ferrera, 1996), the “East Asian” (Aspalter, 2006), as well as “in/security” (Bevan, 2010), “liberal informal” (Barrientos, 2010), and “informal security” (Wood, 2010). Building on Esping-Andersen’s work, there have been studies on regimes for supporting life course transitions (Walther, 2006, 2020), immigrants’ citizenship and social rights (Ahlén, 2023; Jenson, 2007; Saar et al., 2022; Sainsbury, 2006), and care work (Kilkey, 2023; Lutz, 2017). A third approach is taken by the French Regulation School, which sees modern nation-states not as static entities but as dynamic formations of social relations (Horvath et al., 2017, p. 304). This approach highlights the interplay of regulation with power relations and inequality, focusing particularly on mobility practices and control mechanisms. It thus sheds light on the “autonomous agency” of individuals, such as migrants’ subversive evasion of control measures (Horvath et al., 2017, p. 304; Olmos, 2019). A fourth perspective analyses regimes through the lens of governmentality, focusing on the political rationalities that inform policies, for instance, mobility in the context of migration. It encourages the examination of the intricate imbrications of discourse, power relations, and subjectivities (Horvath et al., 2017, p. 305).

In more recent discussions, the lens has been broadened to take in the dynamic nature of regimes as rules of interaction and the roles of various stakeholders in shaping them. Migration regimes, for example, involve state policies but also the impact of institutions, NGOs, and other actors who influence individuals’ experiences through formal and informal practices. Consequently, Karakayalı and Mecheril (2021) theorise regimes as the “consolidation of a compromise”, emerging from contradictory societal processes and conflict-laden negotiations involving multiple actors (pp. 77–78). The regulation of migration, therefore, is not solely the result of (national) state actions but also a product of the actions of diverse actors, including local and national governments, regional political bodies such as the EU, transnational entities, NGOs, self-help migrant organisations, media, and foundations. These actors engage in diverse, complex, and often competing activities,

such as round-table discussions, conferences, expert reports, and declarations, all of which are embedded in hierarchical and vertical power relations (Karakayalı & Mecheril, 2021, p. 78).

Regimes can thus be seen as a dynamically evolving and contested array of norms with which individuals must grapple. The remainder of this chapter focuses on migration and labour market regimes as affordances that shape opportunities for learning, particularly during times of transition.

Migration Regimes and Labour Market Regimes

Migration regimes present challenges and affordances that immigrants must face, for instance, the recognition of their prior qualifications (Webb, 2015) and other structural barriers (Shan & Fejes, 2015). By including non-state actors, the concept of a migration regime departs from the more traditional notion of a migration system, which focuses on political, economic, and legal structures (Karakayalı & Mecheril, 2021, p. 78). Migration regimes view the regulation of social relations not as the direct outcome of political and legal structures but rather as the result of social struggles, which repeatedly culminate in institutional compromises, either stabilising or dismantling established norms (Tsianos, 2010, p. 2). Thus, the concept of migration regimes decentralises the systemic aspects of social relations, perceiving regulations as condensations of social actions and advocating a perspective in which migration does not appear as a “natural” phenomenon that must be controlled (Tsianos, 2010, p. 2).

Labour market regimes similarly influence transitions by establishing norms of employability, qualifications, and the nature of work for which individuals are eligible (Billett, Salling Olesen, et al., 2023; Nilsson & Nyström, 2013). Nilsson and Nyström (2013) point out that a labour market in an employability regime is characterised by “increased demands for mobility, self-reliance, and individual agency” and that “the responsibility for the investment in lifelong learning is increasingly individualised, resulting in increased inequalities with regard to participation in adult learning, the labour market, and society” (p. 184).

This regime perspective enables examination of how state and institutional regulations interact with individual responses to migration- and labour market-related challenges. Pointing to the relationship between regulation and individual engagement with them, Walther (2020) notes that welfare and transition regimes function as integrative normalisation mechanisms within the horizon of shared life projects and expected life courses (p. 154), though the institutionalisation of transitions varies internationally (p. 160).

Focusing on the interplay between regulation via norms and institutions and individuals’ engagement with this regulation, a regime perspective sheds light on the complex entanglements of actors that shape the opportunity spaces for learning. Additionally, a perspective that sheds light on learning processes will provide

more detailed insights into the effects of regimes. The following section elaborates this by drawing on two empirical studies in the fields of migration and work-life transitions.

Learning by Engaging With Migration and Labour Market Regimes

Migration and learning opportunities: the case of “Canadian experience”

The influence of migration regimes and the interplay between regulation and individual engagement can be illuminated by a study of learning processes during migration (Bernhard, 2022, 2023a, 2023b, 2024b). This research focused on how migrants in Canada navigate transitions, particularly into the labour market. This includes dealing with societal and institutional expectations and demands that can be conceptualised as a migration regime – the “network of rules, norms, and procedures that regularise behaviour and control its effects” (Keohane & Nye, 1977, p. 19). One of these norms pertains to the persistent, vaguely defined, and somewhat paradoxical requirement to obtain Canadian work experience in order to gain access to the Canadian labour market (Bhuyan et al., 2017; Chatterjee, 2015; Ku et al., 2018).

Data were gathered in 2021 through biographical-narrative interviews (Chase, 2018) with 20 persons who had moved to Canada three or more years earlier and who had completed their post-secondary education before arriving. This focus on so-called highly skilled migrants aimed to bring into view the ambivalences of ostensible desirability – as expressed through skills-focused migration regimes that prioritise the utility of migrant skills and competencies (Shan & Fejes, 2015) – and the problems this group faces trying to make a successful transition into the new labour market. The data were analysed using the documentary method (Bohnsack, 2014; Nohl, 2010), which presupposes that “what is communicated verbally and explicitly in interview texts is not the only element of significance to the empirical analysis, but that it is above all necessary to reconstruct the meaning that underlies and is implied” (Nohl, 2010, p. 200). This approach brings into view not only explicit rules but also implicit norms that may run counter to official policies of non-discrimination and yet have significant regulating effects. Of particular interest in the analysis were thus modes and figures of speech, such as positive or negative images which point to participants’ implicit knowledge and frames of orientation. The goal was to reconstruct and contrast different experiences and engagements with norms and expectations arising from the migration regime.

The regime’s influence on learning: engaging with the Canadian experience

Interview participants experienced and engaged with the affordances provided by the challenges of the migration regime in different ways, as is shown in

the interview excerpts. One participant, “Maryan”, describes their difficulties in navigating the Canadian labour market, particularly the devaluation of their non-Canadian qualifications and the requirement to gain Canadian experience:

It was really hard. This is a person who was driving; now I have been reduced back to using a bus. These things I must do because I know that volunteering – I can quote that as a Canadian experience and I’m struggling here finding a job because it’s my UK experience: Canadians are not really liking it for some reason. So now I must start doing things that I’m gonna start adding on to my résumé.

(Maryan)

This excerpt illustrates how migration regimes can produce a landscape in which skilled migrants’ agency is constrained. Maryan’s reference to “being reduced back to using a bus” highlights a downward social and economic mobility experienced upon migration, which can be understood as a manifestation of the institutional compromises demanded by a migration regime that devalues foreign credentials and experience, even if obtained in a country deemed similar to Canada. The decision to pursue volunteer work is an active adaptation to the norms – explicit and implicit – imposed by the regime, particularly the demand for Canadian work experience. This highlights how migrants interact with the affordances provided by regimes and learn to navigate the challenges that arise from them.

Another participant, “Chinwe”, took the requirement to obtain Canadian experience as an impetus to rethink long-term life and family decisions:

So over that weekend my husband and I talked about it, we talked about it, (.) . . . this was an opportunity that I had found, we won’t guarantee that I’d find a job even if we move to Oakville straight away so we were going to take that job, we agreed: “let’s at least take this that has come and then maybe after you’ve gotten your Canadian experience the fam– [*laughs*] famous, or infamous, Canadian experience for a year or two then we can think of moving”.

(Chinwe)

Chinwe’s narrative reflects the migrants’ negotiation with the norms established by the labour market regime, particularly the prerequisite of Canadian experience. The laughter about “famous, or infamous, Canadian experience” indicates an awareness of the regime’s paradoxical nature: while the requirement serves to validate migrants within the local labour market, it simultaneously delegitimises prior professional achievements. This decision-making process also highlights how migration and labour market regimes involve familial negotiation, as institutional expectations are weighed against personal and financial risks. Chinwe’s strategy of temporary compliance (“let’s at least take this that has come”) demonstrates how individuals learn to engage with these regimes to create incremental opportunity spaces for future mobility.

However, even after complying with the norms of the regime and meeting the expectations of “Canadian experience”, Chinwe feels undervalued and not fully accepted:

And in a sense, there are times when I’m no longer a new Canadian immigrant. I’d say Canada is home now for me, but there is still a sense in which you still feel shortchanged, is that you feel like you did everything that you’re supposed to have done, you have Canadian experience, for me it’s over seven years, I have a Canadian qualification now.

(Chinwe)

Despite complying with the labour market demands – by acquiring Canadian qualifications and years of experience – the interview participant feels “shortchanged”, highlighting the persistent structural barriers present in the migration regime. This reflects the inherent instability of institutional compromises that fail to fully integrate migrants despite their conformity to normative expectations. Chinwe’s narrative highlights how the normalisation mechanisms of these regimes (e.g., requiring Canadian experience) produce a disjuncture between individual effort and institutional recognition. This ongoing misalignment suggests that the labour market regime operates not merely as an integrative mechanism but also as one that is exclusionary even within the framework of compliance.

Another participant, “Adrian”, describes his initial employment in Canada, which – although very different from his background as a lawyer – provided a foundation for him to navigate the Canadian labour market:

Based on my experience with the different job search strategies, I decided to use online job search and in-person job search, including cold calls, and just attending different employers on spot. . . . And this is how I got my first job in Canada, working in restaurants. Which gave me a really unique experience. Of course, [it] was big difference from my work in Eastern Europe. I was building the foundation.

(Adrian)

This excerpt illustrates Adrian’s proactive navigation of the landscape shaped by migration and labour market regimes. The shift from a professional employment in Eastern Europe to restaurant work results from the structural barriers imposed by the devaluation of foreign qualifications. By learning to use diverse strategies (online job searches, “cold calls”), Adrian exemplifies individual agency in adapting to the labour market regime’s implicit norms of employability and local experience. The reference to “building the foundation” suggests a reframing of the situation, where initial compliance with the regime’s expectations is seen as a necessary step toward future opportunities. This illustrates the dual nature of migration regimes as both restrictive and enabling, contingent on the individual’s capacity to engage with and navigate these affordances.

Interrelating norms, regulation, and processes of learning

Engaging with the somewhat obscure but persistent requirement to obtain Canadian experience as a prerequisite for finding and sustaining adequate employment points to the diverse learning and development needs of working-age adults, particularly during transitions. Taking a regime perspective highlights the *interrelatedness* of norms and regulations and individual processes of learning and coping. Rather than focusing solely on the stated rules and processes, such as the formalised pathways to credential recognition, the understanding of regimes as the result of the actions of diverse actors provides a more nuanced view of the challenges related to the transition into the Canadian labour market and the different ways in which individuals engage with and learn through these affordances. For instance, in one mode of engagement, the requirement to have Canadian experience appears as a challenge that is to be faced repeatedly and cannot be fully surmounted. In a second mode, this requirement is an affordance that leads individuals to significantly alter their expectations, aspirations, and orientations. In a third mode, the requirement of Canadian experience provides an impetus to learning about processes and researching the labour market, akin to a game to be understood and played (Bernhard, 2023a).

In each of the examples, engagement with this aspect of the migration regime is closely linked to learning and the acquisition of knowledge and competencies. First, the non-recognition of existing knowledge and experience makes obtaining Canadian experience necessary. Second, learning and changing perspectives of oneself and the world can be the consequence of dealing with this norm. As elaborated in more detail elsewhere (Bernhard, 2023b), dealing with the affordances provided by migration regimes, including the requirement to obtain localised experience, can lead to transformative learning – understood as a fundamental change in meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 2012) – in both expansive and restrictive senses, but can also be accompanied by learning that is best described as tacit and difficult to articulate (Polanyi, 1966).

Beyond being solely an individual act, however, this learning through engagement with migration regimes is socially embedded and mediated by social practices and relationships (Bernhard & Hof, 2023; Hof & Bernhard, 2025). First, relationally thinking of migration brings into view the co-constitutive character of becoming a migrant through engagement with regimes: individuals often experience incomplete and incongruent transitions, no longer self-identifying as newcomers, but being treated as such by others and the migration regimes. The norms Canadian experience bring into view the questioning and reconstruction of the self that are required for a reassessment of what biographical resources can be drawn upon, and also provide an opportunity to redefine past experiences. These biographical resources and past experiences are shaped not only by migration but also by the related intersectional aspects of family roles, age, and gender norms (Amelina & Lutz, 2019; Bernhard, 2025). Second, engagement with migration regimes is a shared experience as a heterogeneous group of individuals encounter and must deal

with the same norms, however implicit, oblique, or opaque they may be. While otherness is (re-)produced through the Canadian migration regime and the norms pertaining to Canadian experience, outsiders may form a community of experience or practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991/2008) that shares tacit knowledge of the demands placed upon them, even if their engagement with these affordances – and thus the resulting learning – varies. In different ways, individuals understand the explicit dimensions of the norms of the migration and labour market regimes, such as obtaining formally recognised degrees and other credentials, but the implicit dimensions, including illegal discriminatory practices, have persistent exclusionary effects. Thus, the implicit norms of regimes and individuals' engagements with them appear to be particularly fruitful for the understanding of biographical learning.

Transitions and professional learning in labour market regimes

The complexities of regimes and the affordances for learning they offer are also visible in a study of how labour market regimes shape the learning of those who provide institutional support during work-life transitions (Bernhard, 2024a, 2024c). Based on the tenet that transitions are shaped and constructed by various actors and the relations among them, the focus here is on the role of institutions (in turn influenced by the labour market regime). Of particular interest here is the role of the actors – employment counsellors in Germany and Canada – who are both agents of the regimes and subjected to them.

Data were gathered through 17 semi-structured interviews with experts in employment services in Germany and Canada. The intention is not to compare the German and Canadian systems as such but to explore how learning demands and opportunities for employment counsellors evolve in the changing context of varying approaches to occupation and labour market regulations. The different practices in these two countries yield valuable insights against the backdrop of changing significance of occupation in individuals' work lives: whereas a strong, albeit declining, orientation on occupations is found in Germany (Rosendahl & Wahle, 2017), in Canada there is a stronger focus on employability, understood as “individuals' ability to obtain and perform the tasks related to a job” (Nilsson & Nyström, 2013, p. 173). The data were analysed using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), focusing on the different configurations of needs for learning, qualification, and competency, and the tension between flexibility and stability throughout working life.

Labour market regulation and learning through work-life transitions

Findings point to different sets of practices in which the interviewees learn how to deal with regime-related challenges while supporting individuals going through work-life transitions. Most notably, the counsellors had to learn to navigate and engage with the tensions among individual needs, institutional constraints, and

requirements of the labour market regime. The ways in which employment supports are structured – a facet of the labour market regime – affect the roles that counsellors assume and, thus, their professional identity. This will be elaborated on by drawing on one of the central themes – engagement with the regulations – and identifying different practices.

The employment counsellors in Canada and Germany frequently mentioned the importance of regulations and guidelines – for instance, regarding funding for further training – albeit in different ways. Whereas for some counsellors, regulations are to be navigated together with the client, for others, regulations act as constraints that must be enforced. The following interview excerpts from Canadian employment counsellors illustrate practices that are characterised by coming to understand the labour market regime rules and to assist clients with applying them in creative ways. Learning the rules enables counsellors to navigate them for the clients who often do not fit neatly into the scenario envisioned by the regulations:

If you know the rules, [you] can figure out a way around them. (Keegan). . . . Sometimes we try to put rules and regulations around situations or around funding. . . . But I meet so many people that don't fit in those squares.

(Maddie)

The regime and its regulations thus present affordances for learning in to support career transitions effectively. In contrast, the role of some employment counsellors in Germany is marked by the ambivalence of needing to understand the regulations in order to help the clients and yet also being those who exercise the enforcement of these regulations. Interviewed counsellors repeatedly referred to sanctions, to the voluntary or mandatory character of meetings, and to the constraints placed upon them by regulations:

So there are the different jurisdictions, which are simply defined by law. We are only allowed to look after people who are also entitled to benefits here.

(Hagen)

This is a very, very big problem, that these discussions [regarding labour market integration of refugees] take place in public and measures are presented as already being implemented and we sit here and have no instructions and no basis for it. That just doesn't work. So right now, it's very, very difficult.

(Karola)

One of the main challenges these counsellors face is the constant changes to the regulations and the lack of resources available to assist clients: “And that's a bit of the dilemma we're in right now. We have a law, we have the measures for it, but we have no financial resources to fund measures” (Svenja).

Changes to funding represent affordances that require counsellors to develop new skills and to redefine what their role is and could be:

Now it has become necessary to look outside the box of the SGB II [welfare law] again, to see what you can do with the clients. . . . Be it foundations [or whatever]. There are so many, there are about 100 different foundations in Stuttgart alone*, where there might be potential help for us.

(Benjamin)

These learning needs encompass not only the acquisition of practical and procedural skills, but also the counsellors' ability to deal with the pressures and ambivalences of their roles: "I believe that a very, very important topic in the future will be the internal qualifications of our own staff, but also the provision of resources to [help people] to stay in or restart in the labour market" (Karola).

Relating individual and institutional responses to work-life transitions

This study's findings reveal various ways in which professionals within institutions support working life transitions across different labour market regimes. As the interview excerpts briefly indicate, counsellors in Germany and Canada are acting in different and changing societal, economic, and regulatory configurations. These specific forms of structuring society, including labour market and welfare regimes, and the educational systems, not only affect job seekers' approaches to work but also present different learning opportunities and demands for employment counsellors. The study points to the need for employment counsellors to learn constantly and to reposition themselves vis-à-vis ever-changing regulatory frameworks and regimes of labour market support. Their learning entails both dealing with the explicitly stated rules and with the implicit norms of these regimes. Furthermore, the findings show that the relationship between regime and learner must be conceptualised as more complex and interdependent than an understanding of mere framing through regimes would suggest. Put differently, regimes have a mediating rather than determining role in learning and the life course, and as such they shape requirements and opportunities for learning which can be conceptualised as opportunity spaces. In these opportunity spaces, individuals engage with affordances and learn by dealing with the explicit and implicit rules of regimes.

Conclusion: Engagement With Regimes as Situated Learning

This chapter has sought to advance the discourse on adult learning by exploring how regimes – understood as a network of rules, norms, and procedures – shape affordances for individuals to engage and learn, particularly during transitions in their working lives. As the conceptual arguments and empirical illustrations intended to show, a regime perspective may sensitise to the situated interplay

of learning processes within transition processes and the framing of transitions through regimes. The argument is that whereas regimes may construct and shape barriers to full participation in society, they may also, through individuals' engagement with them, create learning opportunities. In both studies cited here, individuals learn to navigate the demands and develop new competencies and perspectives as they engage with the affordances of the labour market and migration regimes (Bernhard, 2022, 2023b).

The regime perspective helps to differentiate and illuminate the situatedness of learning, particularly the community contributions and societal dimensions of learning in transitions (Billett, Choy, et al., 2023). The relationship between regimes and communities – broadly understood as including institutional and societal factors – is twofold: on the one hand, communities are shaped by the regimes, the networks of rules and regulations surrounding them, and on the other, these rules and regulations are mediated by communities. Put differently, actors at various levels of the regime construct, shape, and learn, prompting us to conceptualise the relationship between the regime and individual in more complex and interdependent ways.

Adult learning is embedded in and shaped by the interplay of individual experiences, institutional structures, and broader societal discourses. Conceptualising learning as changing participation in changing practices (see Lave et al., 2026), one can investigate specific aspects of this situatedness. While adult learning can be understood as negotiating challenges and irritations (Hof & Bernhard, 2025), especially during transitions, examining the particular relationship between regimes and a person's interaction with them provides deeper insights into how the interplay between personal experiences and situational arrangements creates specific opportunities for learning. This underscores the need to theorise learning not as a linear, individualised process but as socially embedded and marked by multiple and sometimes contradictory influences. Future research could further investigate how individuals navigate and negotiate regimes in other spaces, paying close attention to how they reconcile competing institutional requirements and societal expectations. Future research could also focus on the impact of positionality – the relationality between the subject and the social – regarding learning in the complex interrelations between individuals and regimes (see Bernhard et al., 2026).

These theoretical considerations have implications for policy and practice: a view that considers the diverse and sometimes conflicting norms of such regimes highlights the need for policies that recognise and address the tensions and contradictions. As illustrated by the case studies, individuals in transition must frequently navigate changing and sometimes opaque networks of rules and regulations. Learners must deal with changing institutional landscapes that require both adaptability and strategic agency, and those purporting to help them should, therefore, go beyond the transmission of skills and knowledge to develop strategies to navigate the complex and contradictory landscapes of regimes.

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10

RELATING LIFE COURSE AND WORK

Space-Times of Adult Education

Beatrix Niemeyer

1. Introduction

Why do we choose our particular occupations? How do we become a nurse, a teacher, a carpenter, a facility manager, or a salesperson? How do we present ourselves in job interviews? What do we tell our friends when the company closes and we become unemployed? Or, how do we make sense of the rearrangements to work organisation, the changing of job tasks and responsibilities? All these questions relate to the nexus of life course, work, and transitions and show that it is complex and multifaceted. Life course and workplace transitions are closely interwoven (Alheit & Dausien, 1985). Workplace transformations affect the constitution of identities and biographies, while biographical transitions, for example, family formation, illness, or migration, can influence job decisions. Connecting life course, work, and transitions is not only an individual task; it is embedded in the broader historical, social, and cultural contexts. It extends beyond economic considerations, which are always inherent to questions about the relationship between personal life and work, to include mental and material constructions of belonging and identity.

This chapter describes the social situatedness of the individual and social connections between life course and work. It presents the concept of space-times of education as a model for the social space where these connections are made – through individual agency or structuring conditions. The second section explains how the model evolved out of an international research project on how individuals make sense of workplace transformations in various occupational fields of human service work. The methodological approach is detailed with a special focus on the challenges of cross-cultural analyses in international teams. Two case studies illustrate the socio-cultural situatedness of work-related life course transitions. Finally, in light of the case studies, the explanatory potential of the concept of space-times of adult education is discussed.

2. The Concept of Space-Times of Adult Education

The concept of space-times of adult education provides a framework to analyse the difficulties involved in constructing biographies within changing occupational orders from an international perspective while acknowledging cross-cultural similarities and differences in the inherent processes. It is based on the idea that space and time boundaries affect education as a social institution. Socio-historical cultural patterns complicate a common understanding of education, playing out in educational institutions and practices that were often developed during periods of nation-building. In a globalised world, questions about social and individual education transcend these boundaries. Research is needed then into the embeddedness of forms of education, in particular the cultural and historical conditions of education practices, concepts, and research methods (Seddon et al., 2018, p. 3). Such an agenda must tackle basic questions about social continuity and change: how do we grasp the “turning point”, the momentum of individual and social transformation, while acknowledging that these are intrinsically connected? How do we grasp the beginning of an individual transformation? Identify the catalyst for social change? In response to these questions, the concept of space-times of adult education refers to the social sites where the links among life course, work, and transition are individually and collectively forged. The concept embraces the three levels of societal politics, education as planful, organised, collective activity, and individual learning as a subjective process of appropriating knowledge, habits, and mental dispositions.

Space-times of education open up in moments or periods in history, when change is made. They capture the moments or periods in history (or in a biography), when the relation of self and surrounding, subject and world is ultimately transforming.

(Niemeyer, 2018b, p. 44)

Thus, this concept attempts to grasp the space of educational boundary work in its social and historical dimensions. The sharing and understanding of learning as a social practice, and the historically and culturally situated character of social learning, extends beyond the field of employment to include a wider variety and multiple ways of work. Space-times of education emerge in historical situations when established patterns of social borders are called into question. “Education movements” emerge as self-organised activities, creating spaces for orientation in times of social reconfigurations, allowing for the testing of alternative practices, providing further knowledge, and negotiating contradicting interests. Hence, space-times of education extend according to social needs, and in ways that socially make sense. They are built through socially situated practices of interacting individuals and collectives. In this way, they are directed at mediating social inequalities, providing and producing collective narratives to explain and legitimise social differences and to enable individuals to consent (Niemeyer, 2018b, p. 50).

3. From Reconfigurations of Occupational Orders to Space-Times of Adult Education

The concept of space-times of adult education itself is historically situated. It results from several years of international research collaboration examining “reconfigurations of occupational orders” (Heikkinen & Henriksson, 2002). In the early 2000s, experiences and observations of significant workplace transformations during political reconfigurations were described as results of neoliberal reforms. The transformations of ideologies, discourses, and vocabularies, as well as changing practices and programmes of education and occupation, appeared as shifts in paradigms of education and occupation. Those heydays of neo-liberal reforms went along with austerity politics, including cuts to public funding, the commodification of welfare services, and the individualising of responsibilities for learning and well-being in general. Changes in work organisation and welfare politics appeared to be transnational phenomena. In Finland, Norway, Denmark, Germany, the US, and Australia, conditions of employment changed. Occupations disappeared; whole areas of production were shifted offshore. Seemingly, education policy migrated, too (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012; Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012). The various national reforms fatally resembled each other. Given globalisation, advancing technologisation, and digitalisation, given the spread of new control systems in the education and social system, and, above all, given the reduction of welfare provisions, networks of international researchers interested in the social aspects of vocational education and training decided to investigate the social and individual consequences (Molzberger & Wahle, 2015; Aarkrog & Jørgensen, 2012; Stolz & Gonon, 2012; Heikkinen & Kraus, 2009). How did these reforms influence potential change to the social fabric which was based on a system of gainful employment? What methodological approach would be appropriate to find out more about these relationships? How did these travelling politics affect lived experiences at work? How did people react, manage, and cope with the disturbances? How did they re-disturb their workplace practices and relations to re-construct workplace identities?

Qualitative interviews and thick descriptions of case studies were the chosen methods, since the effects of transforming policies were experienced by individuals and had to be dealt with on the individual level. A collection of case studies in a number of countries was initiated, aiming at a better understanding of how workplace reconfigurations affect social coherence and social inclusion (Seddon et al., 2010; Niemeyer et al., 2014).

The focus was on the shifts within hierarchical systems, changes to the meaning of employment identity, and the renegotiation of occupational orders, to learn more about the individual filaments weaving gainful employment into individual identities as well as into whole social constructions. The reconfiguration, the erosion of occupational orders, and the shifts in the invisible maps of social positioning in the workplace and beyond were taken into consideration.

Numerous examples appeared: teachers at community colleges in the United States used their cars as mobile offices, travelling from job site to job site without an office, without a staff room, without a fixed employment contract, always on call, always on the move, the teaching content dictated by the regional employers' associations (Wagoner et al., 2010). Nurses in Scotland (Kubiak, 2010), like the new community nurses in Finland, struggled with shifting responsibilities. The work contracts of education counsellors in Germany ended, together with the support programmes for the young people whom they were supposed to integrate into the labour market (Niemeyer et al., 2010; Niemeyer, 2018a). Finnish vocational schoolteachers were angered by their loss of importance due to the introduction of universities of applied sciences (Filander, 2010); social workers struggled with the reinterpretation of their work as service work (Niemeyer et al., 2010; Niiranen-Linkama, 2010); reforms in the Finnish health sector upset community nurses (Henriksson, 2010). The meaning of professions seemed to change; educational and administrative reforms, and economic and practical labour decisions dismantled, destroyed, and disrupted the internal orders of established professions. Skills lost their significance, competencies were devalued, and the social standing of teachers, nurses, and social workers was reduced, affecting self-esteem and job satisfaction. Detailed analyses, however, showed that the crucial matter was not skills, training, or certificates. Concerns were rather about the reconfigurations of workplace organisation and responsibilities.

Empirical evidence of the development of resilience strategies and the regaining of agency in situations of disempowerment or devaluation was gathered using qualitative methods. The data were analysed and compared by multinational teams. The case-based approach produced a common working language, centred on the idea of "disturbed work". This term provided a way of talking about the observed changes in work organisation, workplace arrangements, and expertise that affected people's work identities, how they situated themselves in a workplace community, and how they assigned meaning to their practice. The sequence of disturbed, disturbing, and re-disturbing work structured the further analysis. Disturbed work referred to changes provoked by reforms, governance, and regulations imposed from outside. Disturbing work meant frustrations and questions about self-image and work identity as well as the valuing of work; re-disturbing work described the coping with these changes and reconfigurations from outside through re-arrangements of the individual situatedness within a workplace context or drawing back from it.

The effects of these disturbances in work and learning are registered partly in work organisation, workplace categories and hierarchies, and work practices. They are also evident in the lived experiences of workers. Individuals confront changes in classifications and job roles and shifts in work expectations and relationships. These experiences have practical effects in the way

people see themselves and on the ethical understandings of good practice that underpin their occupational identities.

(Seddon et al., 2010, p. 1)

Most of the collected cases told stories about disturbed occupational orders (Henriksson, 2010; Filander, 2010; Wagoner et al., 2010; Niemeyer et al., 2010; Kubiak, 2010; Niiranen-Linkama, 2010). They described transformed (reformed) systems of orientation that forced individuals to rethink their position within the social space of work, to re-arrange their professional position within a transformed community of practice, and to re-construct their occupational identity. As one example among many, Karen Filander (2010, pp. 99–137) asked how the work ethics and occupational pride of vocational teachers in Finland were challenged by the rhetoric of lifelong learning.

In the public rhetoric of decision makers of educational reforms, education and learning for their own sake, and on their own terms, no longer had any justification. The whole education system was increasingly understood as a basic instrument serving a competitive state and economic necessities. The new aim was to produce a flexible and entrepreneurial workforce and innovations for industry to improve possibilities for better competition on globalised markets. Employees were supposed to be adaptive and innovative at the same time. Personal qualities and qualifications were to be more on the agenda than the older, collectively defined, qualification requirements of occupational knowledge structures.

(Filander, 2010, p. 52)

Filander's detailed analysis showed how the work of Finnish teachers was disturbed by the introduction of polytechnics, a new institutional level in the tertiary education system. She showed how teachers were redefined as salespersons, co-ordinators, and managers of change. In this new order, students were defined as self-directed learners who "self-serviced" their learning choices and individual study plans. Teachers were positioned as subjects within neoliberal discourses, but they reacted politically by using irony to re-anchor themselves in dissolving work organisations. Irony was a liberating strategy and counter-narrative in disturbing times, she concluded.

This and other case studies provided insight into the politics of working life in a globalised world more generally. The majority centred on human service work – teaching, nursing, and social work – which was experienced as disturbed and disturbing, asking how these disturbances both constrained and enabled people's agency in everyday practical politics.

Large-scale changes in work and education are key features of contemporary global transformations. They are also key features of the local lived experience of these changes in particular places – workplaces that are also learning places.

It is our contention that these local places are sites where a significant politics of work are playing out.

(Seddon et al., 2010, p. 1)

The examples of re-disturbing strategies could include active engagement in workplace politics or a complete withdrawal as individual coping mechanisms. In any case, the process of re-disturbing included informal, experienced-based learning. It implied an individual transformation, a change of perspective, a shift in the relationship of the individual to the (working) world. This process might be called informal education, as it is a learning process without teachers, textbooks, or a defined curriculum. Examining re-disturbing practices as learning processes then raised questions about responsibility and power. Regaining agency included negotiating the social space of work and responsibilities within and for it. Hence, the concept of occupational boundaries or boundary work offered a way to analyse the negotiating power, hierarchies, and responsibilities of the old and new actors involved (Newman et al., 2014). The empirical data suggested rather that transformation be understood as a process of transition, unfolding in a complex, multidimensional way. While the sequence of disturbed, disturbing, and re-disturbing work served as working terms for a multi-cultural research team, the concept of space-times of adult education provided a vocabulary, a way to talk about the process of transformation as a whole, covering its social and individual dimensions.

4. Words, Concepts, (Mis-)Understandings as Challenges for Transnational Research

Researching and theorising work and learning in a globalised world is necessarily a transnational effort. The related discourse often confronts the limitations of language and cultural diversity since it matters where a person grew up and in which language he or she expresses their take on the world. Differing models of explanation reflect differing theoretical foundations, and social and cultural settings. The following section addresses some of the methodological challenges, using the clarification of the concepts of work and learning as an example.

As with any communicative process, research into work and learning builds on the sharing of a common vocabulary. Given today's globalised dependencies in commerce, trade, service, and production work, an international perspective is essential. Transnational research communities are an appropriate approach to questions of transnational relations and cross-cultural concerns. Still, clarifying concepts is even more challenging in a multi-lingual and international community. A thorough use of language is therefore essential. The notions of learning, work, and life course are culture-sensitive, and their meaning can change according to the language and context in which they are used. Researching and theorising adult learning at the nexus of the life course, work, and transitions from a transnational perspective, therefore, requires a culture-sensitive approach in which

the clarification of concepts implies the constant process of raising awareness and accepting cultural differences in language, theory, and practice (Gonon, 2017).

For example, the term “learning” illustrates some of the pitfalls of an unreflective use of English as a hegemonic language. In English, learning has a positive, almost enthusiastic connotation of individual improvement. The Cambridge Dictionary defines learning as “to get new knowledge or skill in a subject or activity”, “to make yourself remember a piece of writing by reading it or repeating it many times”, “to start to understand that you must change the way you behave”, “to be told facts or information that you did not know”, “to get knowledge or understanding of facts or ideas or of how to do things”. In German, as in many other languages, there are different, distinct words for these different connotations. “Lernen”, the first and most direct translation of “learning”, refers to the planful, designed, structured, and usually institutionalised acquisition of knowledge or skills. Thus, it presupposes an already given body of knowledge, pre-defined and codified, ready for appropriation. In this instance, how the subject is taught depends on how the teacher transmits the relevant information. Inevitably, such learning confronts the learning individuals with their deficits, pointing to the fact that there is something – information, knowledge, skills, ability – which they do not yet possess. *Lernen* addresses the individual as incomplete, as a person who is yet to be perfected. Hence, there is a tacitly humiliating connotation. The English “learning” is predominantly conceptualised as an additive process; while other languages provide multiple words for the more complex processes of self-transformation through acquiring knowledge, skills, or experience, whereas all these aspects are covered by the English term.

Furthermore, the general notion of learning conceptually presupposes a given subject, a competence, a skill, or the relationship of corresponding facts, etc., codified as a learning aim to be acquired by individual effort. However, such a concept sees knowledge building as an individual task, the appropriation of knowledge that is already there, defined and codified. The social building of knowledge, the emergence of new insights, and hitherto unknown relationships as a social construction of knowledge occur outside of established learning institutions and often within social movements or informal adult education initiatives. *Bildung*, the complex German word for this, includes the transformative dimension of knowledge building by experience (von Humboldt, 1809, 1851). It cannot be adequately translated into English.

The complexities of divergent meanings for seemingly the same term must be explained in a collaborative research process within a multi-lingual team. If this chapter, written by a German author, elaborated in an English-language context, still uses the term “learning”, it is not without being aware of the limits of language and understanding. It would be preferable to use the term “education” instead, especially adult education rather than adult *learning*. The concept of education – despite its vagueness and in contrast to terms such as “learning”, “imparting”, or “acquiring skills” – refers to an autonomous subject’s activity and

thus distinguishes itself from the hierarchies implicit in the concept of learning. Education presupposes individual agency. Education is characterised by an individual construction of meaning, and as such, it cannot be entirely planned but is open to individual self-will (Niemeyer, 2021).

Likewise, it is inaccurate to talk (or read or write or reflect) about work. In this case, the English language provides a range of terms that refer to different aspects of work, which again must be distinguished, especially in the study of life courses and education. While work is a general term, the contexts and activities in question include labour, job routine, practice, employment, activity, agency, and others, all of which are of differing significance in a life course. Talk about work-based learning, therefore, seems to take for granted that “work” refers to meaningful, gainful employment, for which (constant) learning is the prerequisite. Building a life course is a constant struggle for personal improvement. However, this process includes productive and reproductive activities, paid and unpaid work, and self-care and caring for others (Haug, 2010). To better understand how life course, labour, and learning are linked together, we must contextualise the term “work” and clarify what we mean by it.

As these examples show, language influences thinking, and different languages impact the potential grasp on “the world” or, more precisely, the social constructions that make up our being in the world (Berger & Luckmann, 1972). Hence, the concept of space-times of adult education proposes a broader way to talk about transformations of life course, work, and occupations in a transnational community.

5. Dipping Into Cases – Life Course Transitions as Space-Times of Adult Education

Collecting and analysing cases of “disturbed work” was an attempt “to better understand adult learning and the demands, changing nature and evolving role of work in people’s lives” (Seddon et al., 2010, p. 2). Many of the practices described in the 2010 publication meanwhile became normalised. Short-term project work, insecure job perspectives, and individualised workplace relations today provoke little critique among new generations of self-employees in a labour market of human-service work. However, the core questions about where, when, why, and how to make sense of life courses and work transitions remain. In the early 2000s, disturbed work appeared to result from neoliberal reforms, often introduced hand-in-hand with austerity politics, as an expression of the emergence of globalised knowledge economies. These changes have since infiltrated the everyday practices and habits of workforces in post-pandemic, digitalised, and globalised labour markets. The disturbances described in the qualitative interviews related to changes to working conditions. Criticism of the global spread of neoliberal control mechanisms in health, social, and education policy was a basis for interpretation. In retrospect, however, further aspects emerged that might orient reflections on the relationships between education and work. The following section therefore again

uses two case studies with the aim of updating the discourse about disturbing work, unfolding some of the complexities inherent in the concept of work, and testing the explanatory potential of the concept of space-times of adult education. Both stories illustrate the multi-faceted impact that work in a general sense has on life course transitions in a globalised world. They shed light on transnational biographies, the exclusiveness of labour and employment, and the value of work.

a) The labour of belonging

The first case involves the work of Anita Devos, who runs a series of collective memory workshops with a group of migrant women living and working in a regional city in the Australian state of Victoria (Devos, 2014). They migrated either as partners of skilled migrants or as skilled migrants themselves. Devos reveals how they engaged in educational boundary work when negotiating the material and metaphorical boundaries that defined their positions and identities, including visa categories and professional recognition, the conditions of local labour markets, and geographical barriers. The following quote comes from a woman from Sri Lanka who gave up her career in the natural sciences to migrate with her husband to Australia, where she had to restrict herself to the roles of homemaker and mother. At one of the memory workshops, she talked about the beginning of her life in Australia:

We built a house and settled in, and I spend quite a lot of time doing my garden. All the plants are different here to Sri Lanka. When I see a nice garden and I want to know something I just ring the doorbell and ask. I have made lots of friends that way. People invite you in for coffee and then you in turn invite them home for tea. People who grow their own fruits and vegetables like to share with you. I feel settled here, to an extent, but I miss my family.

(Devos, 2014, p. 413)

In her analysis of the workshop transcripts, Devos observed that “throughout all the women’s narratives were the signs of their efforts to find meaning in their new lives in the new place”. Building relationships with neighbours, strangers, and family members was a core and persistent topic in their stories. In this example, the plants and the garden are metaphors for the process of putting down new roots. Devos identifies this process as “the labour of belonging”. She concludes:

The value of theorising “belonging” in terms of educational work is to firstly, make explicit the labour involved in making a home in a new place, labour that is (I suspect) mainly performed by women; and secondly, through a specification of the forms of work involved, to map the processes in a systematic yet sympathetic way in order to explore how we make “home making” possible under the conditions of contemporary globalisation. Further, the value of

educational work as a concept may lie in its capacity to not simply make this possible, but to develop its potentiality as generative. That is, to view the work of belonging as generating new ways of thinking and being outside the centre, for individuals and communities; and of new ways of understanding places as they are transformed into new places through the forces of globalisation.

(Devos, 2014, p. 415)

In this case study, the “labour of belonging” includes the physical activity of gardening and active communication with the new neighbours. This type of work is often overlooked. It is neither calculated nor planned nor acknowledged nor credited. Still, it belongs to the transformations inherent to migration, taking place in a distinct space-time as an individual process of informal adult education. It shows the special kind of “reproduction work” that accompanies labour migration: work in a foreign country implies not only managing workplace demands but also adjusting to new social and cultural demands and creating ways of social belonging – a process usually not taken into consideration. The story also points to other insights of similar importance. Not surprisingly, it illustrates the gendered dimension of labour migration. The case unveils the myth of educational achievement leading to better employment chances. Many of the women in this project had earned diplomas in their home countries, which were not recognised in Australia. This also shows how labour is one of the most regulated social spaces and demonstrates the exclusiveness of work as wage labour. The optimistic perspective on transnational labour or learning migration, and the praising of transnational experiences neglect the limits that individuals face in the context of so-called labour migration. It hides the difficulties that must be overcome not only by the individual who holds a work permit but also by his or her whole social network. The policing of cross-national and intranational space frames an unintended yet distinct space-time of adult education.

b) Connecting through work

Qualitative data for the second example were collected 2018 during an action research project in the German-Danish border region. The project aimed to promote cross-border work and learning mobility among German and Danish production school students, that is, young people having difficulties entering the labour market on either side of the border (Niemeyer et al., 2020). After struggling with learning throughout his school life, a 21-year-old man was then in his second year of an apprenticeship as a bike mechanic at a Danish production school. While there, he volunteered for a two-week internship in Germany. He talked about his arrival in the foreign country and his first impression of the workshop. When confronted with the unfamiliar environment, the foreign language, and the new situation at the German bike shop, he referred to his workplace knowledge and competences.

Entering the internship facility for the first time, he was impressed by the number of bikes and spare parts.

[S]o when I walked in, [it] definitely didn't seem like they were lacking bikes to get going. It was pretty paved over by them. I've seen a few bike shops here in Denmark, but definitely none with that many parts. But tools, that was what we were missing.

(Niemeyer et al., 2020, p. 37)

Work organisation and workplace knowledge provided a bridge for him to connect with his new surroundings. He built his relationships at the new place by joining workplace practices. Engaging in work routines was a way to become familiar with the team, as he describes:

It was just like this: You're new to bikes, here's where you can start. In any case, you didn't get cold on your fingers. It went pretty quickly, so I think the first day I was there, there were probably three bikes that I was busy with. . . . I definitely think that's the best way to do it. . . .

That you work and then just borrow a tool from someone, go and help briefly or something, so that, I almost think, is the best way instead of just sitting there and there's not much to do and you don't really know how to break the ice. So that's how I slowly got to know the others.

(Niemeyer et al., 2020, p. 38)

His story has a transnational context that illustrates how work in a broader sense includes engaging in a common activity, thereby creating a mode of belonging, though in this case for only a limited time. The young man describes the process of orienting himself in an unfamiliar space as a labour of connecting, in which workplace practices were an important anchor for him.

What do both cases have in common? What do we learn from them about the nexus of life course, work, and transition?

Both are stories about life course transitions. They are examples of individuals desiring to belong and their active engagement in building belonging through work activity. They are stories of re-appropriating social recognition in a disrupted social context. They illustrate the importance of work and allow insights into processes of reorienting and regaining agency. The disrupting of the familiar social environment prompts a process of transformation. Connecting to the foreign environment and situating oneself in a different community requires work in multiple dimensions. To consider it as a space-time of adult education allows a comprehensive analytical view of this complex social process.

At first sight, the two cases seem to refer to quite contrasting notions of work. However, in both cases work is a physical activity; it unfolds in a concrete, material, graspable, dimension, thus providing the practical basis and framework for the

social activities related to the transition process. Work is the means by which individuals construct belonging and make connections, deeply rooted in the social context, which is at the same time re-constructed. Work, no matter how it is socially framed, functions as a crucial site for (re)constructing belonging and meaning. Workplace practices can provide the framework for connecting with a new community of practice.

Like the earlier cases of re-disturbing work, these two cases highlight the social dimension of learning and work. The practices referred to are not about the upgrading of skills or competencies. Instead, they tell stories about disturbed occupational orders, workplace politics, and power plays within the wider social context of work. Questions of acknowledgement, valuing, and recognition are relevant in this perspective, often in a negative fashion that de-values work, does not recognise effort and achievements, does not acknowledge individual engagement or expertise in the re-organising, re-arranging, re-structuring of established institutional and organisational arrangements, or imposing, excluding, and limiting labour market legislation.

6. Concluding Remarks

Education as the individual appropriation and intergenerational transfer of knowledge and insights is a social need, as work is an active engagement with and appropriation of the world in order to make it habitable (Niemeyer, 2021). Education and work are both core categories of socialisation (*Vergesellschaftung*), that is, the individual and social construction of relating subject and world, forming both subject and society, and allowing their productive powers to unfold. Both are similarly integrated into globalised economic relations. Education as individual appropriation and intergenerational transmission of knowledge and insights is a central category of society, just as work is an active engagement and appropriation of the world. Both spheres, education and work, are subject to the highest social need for regulation, for which complex forms of order have been developed in the course of history (Berger & Luckmann, 1972). At the same time, both categories extend beyond such regulations.

As anthropological constants, work and education are subject to social change and historical transformation. Often, a focus on the economic aspects obscures our view of individual and collective educational processes that take place in the work situations. They are difficult to grasp through economic categories of knowledge and learning. Evidently, education over the life course extends beyond the appropriation of knowledge and skills in designed learning contexts. The work medium seems to be vital for the lifelong interactive engaging of individuals with their social and material surroundings. Hartmut Rosa argues that work has a continuing significance for subjects that cannot simply be silenced, not even by capitalism. He underlines that the work-mediated resonance relationship is an elementary one, with gainful employment forming an essential sphere of resonance, probably especially for late modern subjects (Rosa, 2018, p. 397).

The concept of space-times of adult education (McLeod et al., 2017) refers to the wider framing of historical situations that calls for new insights and knowledge, for reflecting on established patterns of interaction and a questioning of what was hitherto taken for granted. Rather than an analytical tool, space-times of adult education are a way of thinking about historical situations when individual and or collective transformation is initiated and enacted. The concept can be an instrument for grasping and naming a commonly observed phenomenon, and assigning meaning in ways that allow further trans-lingual theorising. It allows analysis of experiences of self-efficacy, relationships of recognition, and constructions of belonging in the context of work for their biographical significance. In other words, reconstructing the mediation of structure and agency permits an understanding of how these are related in a globalised economy in such a way that the relationship remains liveable.

The concept of space-times of adult education combines situational and historical dimensions. Talking about space-times refers to the fact that these spaces of adult learning are historically situated and requires us to look at the present historically. The concept offers a framework that includes the multi-dimensional complexities of learning and work and the nexus of life course transitions. At the same time, it is wide enough to cover the multiplicity of sociocultural differences playing out on it.

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11

LEARNING IN THE RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIPS AMONG WORK, SOCIETY, AND THE INDIVIDUAL AS SEEN THROUGH THREE DIFFERENT TRADITIONS

Berufsbildung, Perezhivanie, and Phronesis

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Understanding the Relationships Among Work, Society, and Individual

The genesis and further development of ideas (i.e., ideation) are subject to the contributions of the different paths along which they have progressed. Those contributions are variously shaped by culture, language, disciplinary and epistemic perspectives, and historical and social imperatives (including fashion). Despite referring to similar phenomena then, ideations can lead to distinct terminology and boundaries which are sometimes substantive, if occasionally nuanced. They are often critiques of ideas that preceded them, bringing insights previously lacking or downplayed. This chapter identifies both commonalities and differences between concepts that have developed in different theoretical traditions and periods of time and that, nevertheless, share a basic understanding of learning in the context of the nexus of work, society, and the individual in changing time. Comparing these three concepts by exploring the differences and similarities between the concepts helps gain a deeper understanding of this relation on an even more abstract level that could in turn inform recent analyses of learning in today's changing times.

It is in this context that the central premise of this chapter is rooted in a belief that there seem to be too few conceptual traditions that integrate and attend effectively to aspects and dimensions we find crucial to viewing learning differently and achieving a deeper understanding of adult learning and development along the life course, for and across working life. Specifically, the starting point here is the notion that robust analysis ought to demonstrate the capacity to recognise, treat, and integrate the following three related dimensions of adult learning and

development: i) relationships among phenomena within and beyond formal instruction; ii) relationships among practical action, sense, meaning, and even wisdom; and more broadly, iii) relationships between intra-psychological (i.e., the personal cognitive, embodied, emotional, and biographical) and inter-psychological (i.e., the social, cultural, and institutional) dynamics. Against this backdrop, in this chapter are compared, contrasted, and where possible reconciled the meaning of three different traditions of thought that have not been brought into dialogue before. It is proposed that each in their own way has explanatory strengths and weaknesses; the following traditions of analysis demonstrate distinct capacities to recognise, treat, and integrate into analysis of adult learning these aspects and dimensions that have been deemed crucial.

The conceptual traditions are the German concept of *Berufsbildung*, the Russian/Vygotskian concept of *perezhivanie*, and the concept of *phronesis* dating back to Aristotle. In all, it was found that these conceptualisations demonstrated both commonalities and distinctiveness that clarify the learning of adults in, through, for, and throughout working life, including transitions that may have been encountered and negotiated relations between the individual and the social.

Why a dialogue amongst (these) concepts? Originating from different traditions of thinking, times, and regions of the globe, these concepts of *Berufsbildung*, *perezhivanie*, and *phronesis* explain – each in their own way – why it is important for a differentiated understanding of adult learning and development to consider the three main dimensions of adult learning and development outlined above as a way of engaging with the social and material world and by that as a source of personal and collective development. Below, it becomes clear how the ideation of these concepts has been subject to distinct historical circumstances and events. Cultural developments and traditions of thinking have led to particular views about, and ways of understanding, human thinking, feeling, and acting, development and processes of learning. Bringing these concepts into dialogue provides insights into how the relationship amongst learning, practical actions, and education – as both individual and social matters – can be elaborated more fully and, in doing so, potentially offer a means of promoting learning and development. This includes considerations of the kinds of educative experiences and personal engagements – both formal and informal – that will be central to effective, critical, open, and intentional ways of being and becoming, both individually and societally. In this way, the chapter seeks to contribute to a dialogue of concepts to accommodate new understandings of the nexus between the changing world of work, community, and society, on the one hand, and individuals' personal, lived experiences in times of change, on the other. It seeks to advance explanatory bases for understanding adults' learning through, for, and across working lives.

These efforts are not directed towards a reductive approach that simply emphasises commonalities to suggest conceptual singularity. Rather, they attempt to

render some alignments across these three concepts as well as their particularities to extract insights on a higher level of abstraction. That is, exploring these concepts to identify how they refer to phenomena that are key to understanding humans' learning and development in social and cultural contexts. Importantly, there is no claim to be wholly authoritative when engaging with and referring to these concepts. Instead, the project is to engage with these three concepts to identify and compare them systematically in terms of how they each, and possibly together, help to explain what constitutes learning across adults' working life and how that can assist in coming to view activity differently and understand translations amongst the individual and the social by practical actions, sense, and meaning.

The discussion in the chapter is organised as follows. It begins by addressing the distinctive meaning and scholarly traditions of each of the three concepts. Next, conceptual descriptions of how each concept conceives of both education and learning are presented. Then the attention turns to how each concept addresses the connections between social structure and personal facts. It concludes with a synthesis, or perhaps better put, a set of statements describing what can be learnt from comparative insights across the three concepts, organised into four themes: i) human capacity for action and (ethical) ii) judgement, moments of learning linking the personal and the social, iii) action, learning, feeling, and thinking are inseparable, and iv) being individuals in social worlds involves relational aspects that facilitate learning. It concludes with four statements about the relations to working life: i) working in a changing world of work makes apparent relationships between the individual and the social, ii) which includes negotiating the meaning of changing work practices; iii) working in a changing environment demands intentionality in thought and action, learning and disposition and processes of personal transformation; and iv) experiences in a changing world of work stimulate learning in practical and personal terms.

The Dialogue of the Three Concepts – A Systematic Approach

Meaning and scholarly tradition

To permit an initial comparison of these concepts it is helpful to present and discuss the meaning of each of them to illuminate both alignments and misalignments. As indicated, ideations like these arise historically as a product of being initiated and advanced through particular linguistic, cultural, epistemic, and disciplinary framings and imperatives. To permit comparisons across these three concepts, it is, therefore, helpful to present and discuss the traditions from which each originated to illuminate the distinctiveness of the origins of their ideation. To this end, and as presented in Table 11.1, the three concepts are described and succinctly outlined.

TABLE 11.1 Meaning and scholarly tradition

Concept	Meaning	Scholarly tradition
<i>Berufsbildung</i>	Emphasises that <i>Beruf</i> as a cultivated form of work is a way through which a person can engage with the world, achieving maturity and personhood (Blankertz, 1969). It encompasses knowledge of the respective field of work; embodied practices; the ability to act successfully, independently, and responsibly when completing tasks; the ability to make mature decisions and shape work processes based on one's own expertise; as well as ethical aspects; <i>Beruf</i> is a matter of subjectification (Kraus, 2025)	Arises through (mostly German-language) philosophy of education, where <i>Bildung</i> is seen as emerging from the relationship between the individual and the world, relating to worldview, knowledge-based maturity, and the ability of a person to reflect on their position in the world. It is connected to humanity and traditionally devalues work; <i>Berufsbildung</i> enlarges this thinking and links <i>Bildung</i> with the idea of <i>Beruf</i> as a potential means to develop and achieve <i>Bildung</i> as a form of personhood through engagement with the world.
<i>Perezhivanie</i>	Is defined as the meeting point of context and a thoroughly historical, socialised, and uniquely biographical personhood (Fleer et al., 2017). Dramatic <i>perezhivanie</i> (see next section), in turn, refers to distinctive moments and contexts of <i>perezhivanie</i> associated with the potential for the learning of transformative human agency and new transformative personhood. Especially as related to its transformational moment, <i>perezhivanie</i> is premised upon “the contradictory nature of human development—there is no development without conflicts and dramas” (Sukhikh et al., 2022, p.3).	Arises from Vygotskian psychology taken up in more contemporary forms of cultural psychology and to a lesser degree theories of activity, and from its origins it is explicitly influenced by theories of art, on the one hand, and Spinozian, Hegelian, and Marxist theorisation of societal change, on the other.
<i>Phronesis</i>	Refers to intelligence relevant to practical actions and in particular situations, with, commitments associated with situated judgement, but also personal qualities of character and habitual intelligence relevant to practical actions and, in particular situations, with commitments associated with situated judgement, but also personal qualities of character and habit (Aimes et al., 2019)	Arises through Aristotelian philosophic thought that delineates two different forms of practical knowledge, both being situational and in need of extensive experience. One form is <i>phronesis</i> , which denotes the capacity to deliberate wisely about the course of action best suited to promote human flourishing in a particular situation. The other is <i>techne</i> or craft-like knowledge, the skills and knowledge needed to achieve some instrumental purpose, be it navigation, sculpture, or healing

Meaning and scholarly tradition: Berufsbildung

The concept *Berufsbildung* links two distinct ideas which are central epistemic patterns in the German philosophy of education. That is, *Beruf*, as a cultivated form of work that is associated with a calling, expertise, and meaning, and *Bildung*.

Bildung refers to: “processes of cultivation of human capacities as well as to the end state of this process, the state of being educated, cultivated, or erudite” (Fuhr, 2017, p. 3). As a process and a state of being, *Bildung* is rooted in the relationship between the individual and the social world which is expressed in different forms of knowledge, values, culture, and practices. It refers to a reciprocal exploration based on the premise that the person and the development of their capacities are always the central concern. It is the individual that actively connects with the lived world around them, and by this connection develops a view and understanding of the world and correspondingly their own personality and way of being. People become who they are via the paths of connecting with the different aspects of the world, expressing knowledge, values, and culture. This relates *Bildung* to *Mündigkeit* (i.e., maturity) because one manifestation of *Bildung* is the ability to make one’s own decisions based on acquired knowledge and understanding about the world.

Central to this relational understanding of *Bildung* is its framing as a form of liberal education that does not serve a defined and specified purpose, and, therefore, the original concepts are very distant from work and its demands. Instead, it is characterised by the purposes and capacities to secure a degree of freedom for individuals (Zirfas, 2018). The concept of *Bildung*, therefore, always goes beyond clearly defined requirements and puts the worldview and the relation of the individual to themselves and the world at its centre. Moments in the process of *Bildung* are those in which individuals change their worldview and their understanding of self (Nohl, 2024). As such, *Bildung* is a counter-concept to strictly pre-determined requirements of personhood, learning, and trajectories of life course. It is a personally negotiated process – one that is not wholly socially, culturally, economically, or politically determined. Nevertheless, formal education is highly valued because it provides access to knowledge and culture, thereby enabling individuals to enjoy a certain degree of freedom from social constraints and the hardships of everyday life. From the perspective of educational theory, school and education systems should be geared towards this goal.

Etymologically, *Bildung* comes from the word *Bild* (i.e., image) as used in the Middle Ages. Two aspects are central to these historical roots. Firstly, the striving to realise the image of God in man (i.e., a normative idea of the directionality of human development) and secondly, the *Bildsamkeit* of man (i.e., the human potential to attain or at least strive for Godlikeness through one’s own development) (Zirfas, p.15). In the Neo-humanist period (18th century), the notion of *Bildsamkeit* was supplemented with bourgeois ideas that made the project for education the striving for an image of humanity in one’s own person, the project for education (von Humboldt, 2019, p. 7). With this definition, Humboldt formulated a core epistemic idea still referred to today in German-language philosophy of education and beyond. This concept of *Bildung* is premised on a separation of the person and the

physical and social world, thereby reflecting the dualistic thinking of European philosophy. Yet, whilst separate, it emphasises associations with that world, by referencing individuals' dependence on the world and its scientific and symbolic knowledge. This is because they are not capable of *Bildung* on their own, but only through confronting and engaging with the world in which they live.

Such positioning remains explanatory today, as it emphasises the possibilities of individuals' autonomy, maturity, humanity, and freedom in relation to their given circumstances. This is aligned with the traditions of Humboldt that conceives individuals as fundamentally – if conditionally – free and independent of the constraints of human existence, premised on their difference from the world. Such premises are consistent with a valorisation, because in this conception, engaging with the factual requirements and constraints of human existence always have the potential to render people unfree.

This idea can be related to vocational training, which is typically focused on practical action in the workplace. Vocational education theory (*Berufsbildungstheorie*), therefore, challenges the devaluation of work owing to the conceptualisation of *Bildung*: in this conception, *Beruf* as a cultivated form of work related to calling, expertise, and meaning also serves *Bildung* as an idea of unique personhood in a cultural world with moral and civic qualities (Blankertz, 1969; Gonon, 2022). According to vocational education theory, learning and practising a *Beruf* is also a way of acquiring *Bildung*. This is because learning a *Beruf* requires intensive engagement with the subject area, which, like engagement with other cultural forms, leads to a mature understanding of oneself, others, and the world. Thus, individuals' connections with the world encompass the world of work, with its material and social aspects, and promote the process of *Bildung*. *Berufsbildung* comprises knowledge of the respective field of work, the ability to complete tasks successfully, independently, and responsibly, and to shape work processes on the basis of expertise and bodily incorporated knowledge, as well as ethical aspects and personality (Kraus, 2022, 2025). As such, *Berufsbildung* is a matter of subjectification.

Meaning and scholarly tradition: Perezhivanie

The conceptualisation, elaboration, and empirical investigation of *perezhivanie* have evolved considerably over the last 100 years. At least three scholarly traditions/eras, beginning within Russia and then moving beyond its borders, need to be accounted for in the ideation of *perezhivanie*: a) its origins in the so-called Silver Age of pre-revolutionary Russia that occasioned the initial framing of *perezhivanie*, beyond its everyday usage, specifically as a learning concept; b) the scholarly era of Stalinism in Russia that occasioned the last statements of Vygotsky on the concept of *perezhivanie*; and c) the expansive contemporary scene of distinctive interpretations and debate.

The origins of *perezhivanie* as a conceptualisation of learning are credited to the earlier and the last period of the Russian psychologist Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky's (1896–1934) work. Quite correctly, Vygotsky's thinking in this initial period has been associated with Marx and Hegel. However, his original conceptualisation was also influenced by the writings of the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza and the formulation of the notion of “body and mind as two attributes (i.e. manifestations) of one substance” (Roth & Jornet, 2016, p. 316). This initial conceptualisation of *perezhivanie* appears in Vygotsky's doctoral dissertation (1925/1971), also heavily influenced by discussions of the term among Russian drama educators/practitioners (most notably Konstantin Stanislavski) in the context of a national culture that has been called Russia's pre-revolutionary Silver Age of arts and letters. It was against this cultural and historical backdrop, and mix of intellectual influences, that Vygotsky first came to take up the everyday Russian word of *perezhivanie* (e.g., living through) and conceptualised it in terms of learning and human development theory.

The second scholarly era serving the development of *perezhivanie* is tied to Vygotsky's last set of lectures undertaken amid an atmosphere of Soviet suppression of concerns for “idealism” associated with exploration of individual personality or subjectivity (Veresov, 2005; González Rey & Martinez, 2017). Already underway prior to his death from tuberculosis in 1934, this era of repression also set the stage for the emergence of Russian Activity Theory, usually associated with the works of A. N. Leontiev; its purportedly more outward-looking, “materialist” account of learning and development was thought to be more closely aligned with ideological preferences of the Soviet government at that time (Bakhurst, 1991).

In these lectures, Vygotsky defined *perezhivanie* as follows:

Perezhivanie is a unit where in a non-decomposable form is presented, on the one hand, the environment that is experienced – *perezhivanie* always refers to something that is external to the person – and, on the other hand, what is presented is how I experience it, i.e. all the features of the personality and all the features of the environment presented in the *perezhivanie*, what was selected from the environment, all the moments which are related to a given personality and selected in the personality, all of the features of character, all of the constitutional features related to this event.

(1934/2019, pp. 71–72)

Following upon Vygotsky's dialectical methodological approach (i.e., what he referred to as the synthetic method), many seemingly distinct aspects, dimensions, elements, mechanisms, and processes of *perezhivanie* are understood relationally according to this “non-decomposable unity”. By this, he meant that a conceptualisation of learning and development (a viable analytic “unit”) must seek to retain all the relevant features of the whole as an object of research (see, e.g., Roth, 2014; Friedrich, 2021).

Vygotsky's work in this period offered clarifications of the centrality of the external world and its engagement and construction by individuals. The environment both shapes and is shaped by the person. Indeed, in the same lecture, he described *perezhivanie* as involving unique processes of inherently situated "mobilisations" of psychological functions (e.g., memory, attention, perception, emotion) in the form of recognisable individual, biographical personality. The unique personality traits, in other words, are neither strictly mobilised at will, independently, by the learners themselves, nor are they strictly mobilised, caused, or otherwise commanded by the environment (see Vygotsky, 1934/2019, pp. 72–73). Thus, in his conceptualisation of *perezhivanie*, Vygotsky's synthetic (or dialectic) methodological concern for reciprocity is evident.

The third scholarly era shaping the development of *perezhivanie* was largely defined by the détente between Russia and the United States in the 1970s. Glasnost reforms of this period initiated an opening for Russian psychological studies themselves to once again take up questions of "idealism", personality, and individual consciousness (González Rey & Martinez, 2017). This precipitated a growing interest in and adoption of Vygotskian thought by non-Russian scholars.

It is in this context that contemporary accounts such as Fleer's (2016) have summarised key differences that have subsequently emerged in the usage of the term *perezhivanie*. These usages include i) as an analytic unit of personal/situational characteristics, ii) as an analytic unit of cognitive and emotional processes, and iii) as an analytic unit of (enriched) consciousness. She also notes ontological distinctions: (i.e., *perezhivanie* as a unity of human emotions and cognition, as a human interpretive prism, as the experience of double subjectivity in play/art) and epistemological usages (as a unit of analysis). Thus, over time, studies of *perezhivanie* have come to offer diverse views and points of emphasis, suggesting, rather than a singular definition, a conceptual cluster that Clarà (2016) describes as a "*perezhivanie* family" (p.341). And, given that Vygotsky's own formulations were not finalised due to his early death during a period of suppression, both within and outside of Russia, it was this third scholarly era that began the rise of *perezhivanie* studies. With it came an opportunity to elaborate upon understandings of the relations of a unique (cognitive, emotional, embodied, and biographical) personhood on the one hand, and practical action within social, cultural, and institutional surroundings on the other – all as incumbent features of integrated analysis that support certain distinctive possibilities for additional understandings of on adult learning, work, and the life course (e.g., Sawchuk, 2014, 2023).

Meaning and scholarly tradition: Phronesis

Phronesis was originally defined as practical wisdom or wisdom in practice in the era of Aristotle that has two forms, both of which reference practical knowledge, situationally aligned and arising from extensive experience (Tyson, 2018). The first form is the capacity to deliberate wisely on the best course of action to promote

human flourishing in a given situation. The other is *techne* or craft-like knowledge, including the capacities required to achieve goals, such as those associated with occupational practice. These are enacted through “practical knowledge”. Insofar as they refer to intelligence relevant to practical actions and in particular situations, it explains what kinds of thinking and acting are helpful for accounting and learning in, for, and through work. This includes the personal qualities of character and habitual intelligence relevant to practical actions and in particular situations, and which inform effective judgements situated in work settings and emphasise their relation to personal qualities of character and habit (Ames & Serafim, 2019).

In the Aristotelian tradition, *phronesis* or practical wisdom is an intellectual virtue with moral and civic qualities that ultimately guide mature decision-making (Kristjánsson, 2022) and are understood philosophically as the educational incarnation of virtue ethics (Annas, 2011), distinct from *techne*, the knowledge required to achieve instrumental purposes. These traditions have evolved through psychological considerations in recent times, perhaps the most significant of which has been towards a practical notion of wisdom (Grossmann et al., 2020) (i.e., practical wisdom), which has brought the developmental wisdom discourse in psychology into better alignment with a standard education for character or morality (Huynh & Grossmann, 2020). Practical wisdom moves away from being an individual characteristic or virtue to being associated with practice, for example, in care/medical ethics or institutions (Bontemps-Hommen et al., 2019).

Meaning and scholarly tradition – a comparison of the three concepts

Table 11.1 presents a comparison of these three concepts that are drawn from the discussions above. The three concepts are listed in the left column, a synthesis of their meaning as defined qualities as presented in this chapter is advanced in the middle column, and the scholarly traditions from which they arise are in the right column.

How education and learning are conceived

Since the concepts are discussed here in the wake of the approach of seeing learning differently, it is important to explore how learning and education are understood in these concepts.

How education and learning are conceived: Berufsbildung

Bildung does not necessarily view learning as a separate process because it is seen as the antithesis of the goal-oriented acquisition of a concrete learning object. Rather, *Bildung* is seen as developing individual personalities through liberal engagement with cultural achievements, that is, engagement with the social world followed by its appropriation. Aspects of this world are combined in a process

involving the appropriation of the world, its reflection, and the transformation of the individual (Fuhr, 2017). Thus, individuals engage with content, materials, and objects to develop their capacities of humanity (von Humboldt, 2019, p. 6). The selection of educational objects, therefore, plays an important role in education theory (Klafki, 2007). They should enable the acquisition of knowledge and methods and the development of value, and ethical and aesthetic judgements. The content of education is thus seen as exemplary, so that these developments can be carried out on the concrete objects with their content-related and formal aspects (Klafki, 2007). Although often focused on the youthful phase of the life course, *Bildung* is considered a lifelong process, and “being educated” (*gebildet sein*) is a guiding principle for a corresponding way of life.

Three different approaches are important here. First, the education institutions provided by the state should aim at the free and independent development of individuals and should, therefore, be independent from it. Second, self-organised educational encounters with others have long been important, taking the form of social activity in reading groups, literature circles, visits to exhibitions or the theatre, particularly among the educated middle classes of the 19th century, for example. *Bildung* remains associated with the pursuit of scientific and cultural knowledge throughout one’s life. Third, individual engagement beyond national borders to expand knowledge of the world, through travel or reading, for example, has also been important. In all these forms, the understanding of *Bildung* depends on individuals absorbing and reflecting the cultural world they encounter and thereby embarking on a process of transformation of their personhood, their worldview, and their maturity. *Berufsbildung* adds a fourth aspect of learning and education: taking up a *Beruf* by engaging in work-related tasks, becoming a member of an occupational community that transmits vocational practices, ethics, and habits, and developing subjectivity through engagement with a cultivated form of work that fosters the process of *Bildung*.

How education and learning are conceived: perezhivanie

In studies of *perezhivanie*, learning is understood as a fundamental part of human existence that occurs both within and beyond formal schooling – (a) in the myriad, mundane and practical ways that one reproduces and carries out one’s life (i.e., the micro-social situation of development), as well as (b) the dramatic and sometime life-changing instances of one’s life (i.e., the macro-social or ontogenetic situation of development) – within or beyond schooling as such.

Vygotskian-inspired research in both cultural-historical psychology and cultural-historical activity theory fields shares a view of learning as a dialectical process of the *internalisation* of various inter-psychological (i.e., socio-material) relationships in the form of intra-psychological capacities (e.g., schema, memories, knowledge, skills, perspectives, habits, and emotions), *and* the *externalisation* or use of these capacities to affect the environment. This in turn forms an

ongoing (inter-/intra-psychological) cycle and trajectory of development over the life course. Driving the process are instances of internal and external dialectical contradictions, including during infancy, the development of defence mechanisms in adulthood, and tensions in relationships within groups, institutional life, society, and the economy. A crucial feature of this perspective on learning then is the dynamic of double stimulation (e.g., Vygotsky, 1997; Engeström, 2007): learning through the generation or adoption of an alternative (typically otherwise ambiguous) mediating tool, either material or symbolic, to create new capacities for thought, action, volition/agency, and innovation (either or both internally and externally).

Returning to conceptualisations of *perezhivanie* and their connection to learning, and especially to transitions and turning points over the life course, one further set of observations can be added. It concerns the concept of *dramatic perezhivanie*, which begins with an acknowledgement of the inherently contradictory nature of human development:

[T]here is no development without conflicts and dramas. . . . Dramatic *perezhivanie* contains the potential to become a turning point in a [person's] development. It also represents a short-term "microsocial situation of development" and corresponds to the main characteristics of the "macrosocial situation of development".

(Sukhikh et al., 2022, p. 3)

As such, this concept can be viewed as an important sub-category of *perezhivanie*. Its purpose is to illuminate key moments of child development or, for adults, the more radical turning points in the life course (ontogenesis).

The notion of drama and indeed a theory of drama (with Vygotsky, very much influenced by Tolstoy and especially Stanislavsky) is implicit here. Interpreting this influence on Vygotsky's writing about the inter- and intra-psychological meaning of the term "category", Veresov clarifies as follows, noting that in Russian pre-revolutionary theatre vocabulary this word had a distinct meaning.

Vygotsky was familiar with the language of Russian theatre and arts and had to use the word "category" [. . .]. This is a social relation that appears as a category, i.e. as emotionally coloured and experiencing collision, a contradiction between two people, the dramatical event, a drama between two individuals. Being emotionally and mentally experienced as social drama (on the social plane) it later becomes an individual intrapsychological category.

(Veresov, 2005, p. 39)

Thus, the implications of a theory of drama for studies of *perezhivanie* are not merely metaphorical. As Smagorinsky (2011) explains: "Vygotsky sees personality, with its psychological foundation, and art, with its dramatic origins, as

interrelated: The development of personality is fundamentally dramatic, and the phenomenon of art is at its heart psychological” (p. 335).

In sum, a *perezhivanie* perspective on learning involves symbolically and materially mediated *in situ* activity, contestation of object-motives, poly-motivations, shifts in modes of participation, and double stimulation dynamics, all of which confirm the unique character of individuals, biographical personalities, and changes in the thoroughly social character of inner life (both conscious and unconscious).

It is against the backdrop of this conceptual context that an understanding of the relationship of *perezhivanie* and the idea of education, and in fact work-related learning as well, is to be found. Indeed, Vygotsky writes specifically that *educational science* (pedology) must focus on “the specific prism [*perezhivanie*] that refracts the influence of the environment for the child” (Vygotsky, 1934/2019, p. 71). According to his account, a genuinely *educational environment*,

[. . .] plays a role not as the setting, but rather as the source, of development. What does this mean? First of all . . . that if the environment does not have the appropriate *ideal form* and the development of the child for some reason proceeds outside these specific conditions . . . i.e. without interaction with the final form, the appropriate form will be underdeveloped in the child. . . . [Now imagine] a child in this environment where there is *no ideal form*. . . . Will the child develop appropriate activities, appropriate properties? Studies show that he will, but in a very peculiar way, i.e. they will always develop very slowly, very peculiarly and at no moment will they reach the level which they achieve when there is in the environment the appropriate *ideal form*.

(1934/2019, pp. 79–80; *emphasis added*)

Thus, in an understanding of the relationship between *perezhivanie* and educational environments, central is the notion of the “ideal form”. In Vygotsky’s original works “ideal form” – in relation to child development – was often illustrated using the example of *adult language* (e.g., versus child-peer language). More broadly, in his work the notion of ideal form also refers to the most advanced *cultural accomplishments* (especially art and theatre). An ideal form may appear in a variety of guises and developmental situations, potentially making many experiences (within and outside of schools) “educational”. On the contemporary scene, the ideal form in education environments is associated with formalised *curricula*.

In turn, these insights have occasionally given rise to an interpretation of the role of work in learning and education as well. Maidansky (2023), for example, extends an analysis of ideal forms to include *perezhivanie* in learning mediated by practices of *labouring* as yet another example of an ideal form. Coelho-Lima et al. (2021) have analysed *perezhivanie* (including *dramatic perezhivanie*) associated with the changing meaning of employment over the life course, social conflict, and ideology among those working informal jobs in Brazil. Likewise, Sawchuk

examines *perezhivanie* in the context of learning in the face of dramatic workplace changes (2014), and how labour relations can play a role in altering the life course vis-à-vis instances of dramatic *perezhivanie* (2023) in Canada. In these studies, the educative character of the mediation of learning over the life course by an ideal form of labouring (even in the case of its absence) was shown to have significant explanatory value.

The claimed value of analysis of *perezhivanie* as it relates to the study of education, then, is its function as a dialectical unit of analysis of unique and myriad aspects of personhood on the one hand, and any situation which incorporates an advanced or ideal form (of knowledge, culture, labour, etc.) on the other.

How education and learning are conceived: phronesis

Phronesis emphasises processes of learning through doing and engaging in practical tasks and then aligning those with perceptions of what is worthy and valuable in making wise decisions. Hence, the kinds and qualities of experiences are salient, as is how individuals come to have them. Essentially, learning here emphasises how individuals mediate what they experience and subsequently construct knowledge from those experiences. Only limited empirical investigations have been made into *phronesis* and its development and education and most of the work in this area is theoretical in nature (Conroy et al., 2021; Kotzee et al., 2016; Kristjánsson, 2021). Lapsley (2021) argues that the dearth of any empirically credible developmental account of *phronesis* is symptomatic of a “developmental inadequacy” in Aristotelian character theory that makes it surplus to requirements for contemporary developmental science.

Nonetheless, in medical ethics, for example, *phronesis* requires attention and training in both medical education and the medical workplace (Kristjánsson, 2015). Malik et al. (2020) discuss *phronesis* in action, observing that motivation drives the process and virtues are integral. They suggest discussion about the courage required to maintain motivation when a medical practitioner is on a contentious pathway of decision-making. Each practitioner’s reasons for pursuing an ethical (*phronetic*) path must be determined (and maintained) if they are to ensure their commitment to the best interests of their patients (Malik et al., 2020). Similarly, Kristjánsson (2022) discusses the “taught” element of *phronesis* in the context of police ethics training and concludes that most *phronesis* development will need to be “captured” from unfolding personal and professional experiences.

In one systematic review of teaching and learning *phronesis* in administration (Ames & Serafim, 2019), *phronesis* was included either as part of the theoretical framework or as a teaching and learning practice, as well as an element of the purpose of education. Among 11 studies on the theme of teaching and curriculum, 5 are empirical. They reinforce the idea that teaching *phronesis* requires a practice-based or experiential approach (Ames & Serafim, 2019); that is, learning *phronesis* through experience is fundamental.

Finally, regarding the practical literature on character development and education, Kristjánsson (2022) claims that more teaching materials have been produced for primary and lower secondary schools than for upper secondary and early college levels where *phronesis* development usually emerges. He notes critically that most of the copious professional ethics literature on *phronesis* uses not a standard Aristotelian concept but rather one based on MacIntyrean (MacIntyre, 1981) that prioritises other problematics over developmental ones. Kristjánsson adds that as outspoken as Aristotle was about methods of children's moral education, especially habituation and role-modelling, he was unhelpful in delineating useful strategies for *phronesis* development and instead traded in platitudes. Instead, Kristjánsson posed the questions: we want to know what kind of teaching? What sort of experience? (2022, p. 290).

How education and learning are conceived – a comparison of the three concepts

Table 11.2 presents a comparison of how education and learning are conceived in each of these three concepts. The three concepts are listed in the left column, a synthesis of what constitutes education is advanced in the middle column, and the account of learning within each of these concepts is presented in the right column.

Relationships between social structures and personal facts

Situations and practical actions mediate between the persona and the social. Therefore, it is essential to explore how social structures and personal facts are related and the relevance of their reciprocity for learning and education.

Relationships between social structures and personal facts: Berufsbildung

At its core, *Bildung* centres on individuals and their personal development, but it assumes that people must connect with the social world for their personal development and the purposeful unfolding of their capabilities. They need to interact with others to engage their personality and to develop a view of the world, following which they return to themselves and connect with the world they have encountered in such ways that their capacities continue to develop (von Humboldt, 2019, p. 6). *Bildung*, therefore, refers to a reciprocal relationship (“*Wechselwirkung*”, von Humboldt, 2019, p. 7) that goes from the individual to the world and back. The social world as experienced is thus relevant to the purposes and intentions of the individual, the subject, and how they negotiate with objective culture, humanity, and the world (Zirfas, p. 13). All of this is mediated according to personal epistemologies (i.e., what people sense, know, can do, and value), which are shaped

TABLE 11.2 How education and learning are conceived

Concept	Meaning of education	Meaning of learning
<i>Berufsbildung</i>	Education is an intentional process in which a person is confronted with (cultural) artefacts and (scientific and symbolic) knowledge and both located in schools or universities, but also in self-organised forms; in the notion as <i>Berufsbildung</i> the growing into vocational communities and dealing with the requirements of work objects and tasks is included in the understanding of education.	Learning is understood as making oneself familiar with knowledge and culture and developing one's subjectivity. This highlights the free development of the individual that goes beyond the mere fulfilment of the requirements of society and work, expressing a way of being related to the world rather than a learning process as such.
<i>Perezhivanie</i>	An analysis of <i>perezhivanie</i> conceives of education as a relation of, on the one hand, the "personally-unique qualities of life history and personality" and on the other the social-material situation which is purposively and centrally mediated by what Vygotsky referred to as an "ideal form" (the most advanced cultural accomplishment/knowledge/curriculum/form of labouring, etc.). While typically studied in organised pedagogical environments, this approach can be applied to a variety of settings within and outside of schooling.	Learning is constituted by the meeting of personhood and social-material situations through a series of contradiction-driven, cyclical, two-way, mediated relations between subject and object (i.e., person and world).
<i>Phronesis</i>	Education here would be viewed in terms as the original meaning of the word curriculum, the path to progress along the calls to follow. Mostly, across human history such capacities arise through educative experiences, not engagement in formalised educational provisions, although the latter may well now be a key feature of the development.	Learning here is conceptualised as being something that arises through, for, and is shaped by enacting a cultural practice, referred to as an occupation. There is no separation between thinking and acting and learning, and as <i>Phronesis</i> emphasises, the inseparability between thinking, acting, and learning in the form of changes arises from will engaging in activities and interactions.

by and shape individuals' development of the human, which in turn depends on the "non-human", described as "the world" (von Humboldt, 2019, p. 6) and also includes work in the form of *Beruf* (Blankertz, 1969). In this way, *Bildung* is usually understood as a process and achievement of the individual. That is, a process of self-formation through confronting with the social world including other people, regardless if this process takes place through organised events or institutional settings or activities which are self-organised by the person. Therefore, as a personal factor, *Bildung* is expressed in the mature and cultivated way of life of individuals, who realise the general idea of humanity, as characterised by scientific and symbolic knowledge and reflection on the world.

Furthermore, *Bildung* is closely linked to social structure and this relationship is crucial to understanding the concept and essential to understanding the significance of adding *Beruf* to make the compound term *Berufsbildung*. Initially, *Bildung* devalued practical activities and work-related learning. However, by the end of the 19th century, *Berufsbildung* had become about increase the status of work-related learning by combining it with *Beruf*, a cultivated form of work. Then it was claimed that *Berufsbildung* was of equal status to general education and just another way to develop *Bildung* and to become an "educated person". A historical perspective helps to understand this complex relationship. Four aspects should be further mentioned here.

First, when the concept of *Bildung* gained influence, education was associated with the "functionalisation" of human beings within industrial capitalist development and national state building. The idea of a non-functionalist education (i.e., not of societal or industrial purposes) was created that placed individuals' personal development in the foreground and was referred to as "Bildung" in contrast to qualification. This contributed to a schism between general and vocational education, devaluing the latter. The question of the status of vocational education in relation to general or higher education remains today and extends beyond the German-speaking world (Billett et al., 2022).

Second, *Bildung* is associated with the ability to critique existing conditions and injustices, tracing its roots back to the Enlightenment and drawing on this tradition through critical theory. Thus, it is aligned more with a capacity for reflection and criticism than with interventions geared towards concrete change of conditions.

Third, *Bildung* has long been described as a privilege (Becker & Lauterbach, 2016) in the sociology of education. A high level of formal education paves the way to prestigious social positions and more *Bildung*, including in intergenerational relationships. Pierre Bourdieu (2002) pointed this out in his work "Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste": the cultivated manners of the educated and the shaping of their tastes via their education represent a means of distinction that sets them apart from the lower classes and is already acquired in the course of familial socialisation, and thus cannot be compensated for by later formal education and instruction.

Fourth, *Bildung* usually arises through interactions with other people in education endeavours. Despite the apparent focus on the individual, the process of *Bildung*, therefore, is also inherently social. But this is observed only in encounters among “educated people” or in “cultivated work”. Such encounters hold the promise of connecting with good and cultivated life as expressed in their views and behaviour, which in turn connects this with individuals’ subjectivities.

Relations to social structures and personal facts: perezhivanie

Over the last two decades, an interest has arisen within the “*perezhivanie* family” (Clarà, 2016) over the question of how studies of *perezhivanie* ought to acknowledge, conceptualise and analyse the context of learning and developmental situations, inclusive of the dynamics of social, political, and economic structures. On the surface, answers to this question would seem to be offered by the Vygotskian inspired tradition of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). However, this solution has occasioned palpable tensions, regularly involving charges of instrumentalism and or dualism (e.g., Veresov, 2016; González Rey, 2016) directed at forms of CHAT research (including the works of A. N. Leontiev and contemporary scholars inspired by it, notably Russian and Finnish Activity Theorists). Nevertheless, scholars like Veresov (2016) reiterate many of Vygotsky’s original concerns.

In this situation the individual and social are not dualistic oppositions; they constitute a dialectical unity since the inter-psychological [does] not exist the intra-psychological, and vice versa. The reorganisation of the intra-psychological function is impossible without an inter-psychological dimension, and, at the same time, the inter-psychological (social) plane does not exist without the intra-psychological process. Thus, inter-psychological and intra-psychological are dimensions of one “social-individual” or “individual-social” continuum.

(p.254)

Thus, notwithstanding those who would reject the value of studies that seek to understand the role of outer world as such, it may be said that – echoing Vygotsky’s own statements about the “problem of the environment” – the integration of a conceptualisation of activity remains relevant to the further development *perezhivanie* studies (see Roth, 2014; Goulart, 2024; Dafermos, 2024).

Regarding personal facts, it is noteworthy that both Vygotsky’s original and later works focus on the question of unique personality and the unconscious. His attention to the unconscious was seen as necessary to the study of mind and learning, and *perhaps especially so* vis-à-vis the dialectical psychology (Vygotsky, 1997) that he and colleagues were developing. Recently, González Rey (2016) has explicitly stated, “*perezhivanie* advanced the idea that human motivation was essentially an unconscious process” (p.3). Similarly, beginning with Leontiev (1978) and noting the role

of “emotional colouring” of experience unique to individuals, studies of activity have offered insights into both the personal and socio-materially situatedness of the outside world, and the self-conscious nature of goal-directed action, on the one hand, and the un-self-conscious character of object-related activity, on the other.

Relations to social structures and personal facts: phronesis

Aristotle proposed that ethics starts from everyday issues and is associated with virtues, and that it can guide actions by “. . . identifying and respecting the scope of actions on a goal” (Vosman & Baart, 2008, p. 29, cited in Bontemps-Hommen et al., 2019). He conceived *phronesis* as the practical wisdom that guides individuals to achieve the good end (i.e., goal) of human flourishing. Applied to healthcare practices, for example, ethical professional actions should derive from caring as an intrinsically moral activity, using the insights of experienced healthcare workers (Mol, 2008). Consequently, care is considered a relationship between two or more people (i.e., the patient and their family/friends, and the healthcare workers) (Bontemps-Hommen et al., 2019).

Hence, apart from the tradition of morality (i.e., moral virtues) where *phronesis* is enacted as a theoretical concept, practical constructions of it have emerged when shifts from hypothetical to real circumstances are associated with professional, institutional, or organisational practice (Bontemps-Hommen et al., 2019). Given the complexity in human endeavours such as medicine, practical wisdom is proposed as part of the solution to complexity, aiming at the provision of ethical care, re-inventing morality in complexity (Bontemps-Hommen et al., 2019). Practical wisdom engages with social structures via societal expectations, roles, and considerations about what constitutes moral action and worthy activities.

Among the accounts offered of *phronesis* are those that privilege the personal:

It seems proper, then, to an intelligent person to be able to deliberate finely about what is good and beneficial *for himself* (*sic*), not about some restricted area – e.g. about what promotes health or strength – but about what promotes living well in general.

(Irwin, 1986, p. 153)

It is thought to be [the mark] of a man of discernment to be able to deliberate in a fine way about those things good and useful *for himself* (*sic*), not in part – as what sort of things relate to health, to strength – but what sort of things relate to living well in general.

(Schuchman, 1980, pp. 25–26)

These three characterisations of *phronesis* focus on how individuals construe practical wisdom, premised on their interests and ideas about what constitutes a good life. These are represented in ways analogous to very personal epistemologies that

include how individuals construct knowledge from their encounters: practical wisdom is defined by, shaped, and enacted in ways that meet the needs of the individual as they engage with the social and brute world.

The reference to personal factors here emphasises that those who think and act must be able to do so from the perspective of the individual (i.e., personal facts). Given this emphasis on *phronesis* as qualities acquired by individuals through their learning and development, we must consider how the learning process is represented in this tradition.

Relations to social structures and personal facts – a comparative perspective on the three concepts

Table 11.3 presents a comparison of how social structures and personal facts are conceived in each of these three concepts. The three concepts are listed in the left column, an account of what passes as social structures is advanced in the middle column, and those associated with what constitutes personal facts are in the right column.

Synthesis: a dialogue of concepts

To this point, the three concepts have been defined, their epistemic and cultural traditions have been made explicit, and we have considered how they see learning and education as well as how they identify and analyse social structures and personal facts. We found that there are both commonalities and distinctions, which have the potential to inform studies of learning through and for working life in general and in the recent period of rapid changes in the world of work. Building on this, in the following section we present a set of concise observational statements, summarising significant insights that have emerged from the comparison of the three concepts. The findings can provide a framework for debates about adult education and learning in times of change.

The human capacity for action and (ethical) judgement is essential to personal development

All three concepts discussed here deal with a specific human potential to relate to the world but highlight different aspects of it. Human potential to create culture by generating scientific and symbolic knowledge and to perform cultivated forms of work is highlighted especially well by the concept of *Berufsbildung*. The potential for human agency – as exercised by cognitive, emotional, embodied, and biographical personhood, and especially in ambivalent, dramatically charged situations – is best understood in studies of *perezhivanie*. The vast potential for human intelligence that enables people to act practically and to take responsibility for their acts is particularly well explained by the concept of *phronesis*.

TABLE 11.3 Relations to social structures and personal facts

Concept	Social structure	Personal fact
<i>Berufsbildung</i>	<i>Bildung</i> is related to culture as a form of symbolic knowledge about the world; access to <i>Bildung</i> is not distributed equally; historically, it has been invented as a bourgeoisie concept devaluing work and work-related learning and education; <i>Berufsbildung</i> emphasises that work is also part of the culture and a way to develop <i>Bildung</i> , especially by dealing with vocational tasks collectively shared and transmitted in communities of practice in a <i>Beruf</i> as a cultivated form of work	Personal growth is a core feature of <i>Bildung</i> , but still not an end in itself; the individual and their ability to develop play a central role, both in the general understanding of <i>Bildung</i> and in <i>Berufsbildung</i> ; it is about the maturity and capacity for technical and ethical judgements, which they can nevertheless only develop through interaction with others and cultural artefacts; <i>Bildung</i> is a form of being in the world and a lifelong process; in the idea of <i>Bildung</i> , the personal is linked to a general idea of humanity and therein lies the supra-individual, normative orientation of the process of <i>Bildung</i>
<i>Perezhivanie</i>	Treats lifelong learning as inseparable from social situations (and by logical extension, but requiring further analytic supports, most relevantly through the integration of a theory of activity, in order to more fully realise a theorisation of social, historical, political, economic, and institutional structures).	Accounts for the personally unique qualities of life history and personality specifically, yet always in relation to the social-material situation. It leverages the Vygotskian tradition's theorisation on two planes: the psychological and the (quasi-) sociological/political economic/anthropological.
<i>Phronesis</i>	Depends upon structures and orientations. For instance, <i>phronesis</i> and <i>techne</i> were seen as being banal and unsophisticated fields of practice by Aristotle, compared with higher orders of thinking and purpose. However, these concepts are inherently linked to social structures and the development of cultural practices (e.g., occupations). The valuing of what occupations <i>phronesis</i> and <i>techne</i> are being exercised through largely determined their worth and standing. When it is the work of a doctor, surgeon, or airline pilot, they are likely to be valued in a different way than occupations tagged as "trades". However, in the communities which practice such occupations, they are likely to be held in high esteem	The concept refers to an intelligence or nous that is demonstrable through personal attributes and procedural qualities that lead to the achievement of goals, the qualities of and judgements about situationally and circumstantially specific circumstances. So, ultimately, this is something that arises from what individuals have come to know, do, and value and as such it is inherently personal.

To varying degrees, all three concepts emphasise the capacity for judgement as a specific feature of human potential that develops in engagement with the world and orients our ethical engagement with it. For *Berufsbildung*, the idea of *Mündigkeit* (maturity) captures the capacity for ethical and aesthetic judgement as a key feature and the commitment of each individual can make to the further development of humanity. Situated judgement is also crucial to *phronesis*, but personal qualities of character and habitual intelligence are also relevant to practical action and in particular situations. For *perezhivanie*, judgement is always situated as well as biographically informed. Ethics is not an abstract idea but a concrete element of our experience of situations (activities), and an appreciation of ethics is limited to the substance of dialectical contradictions at hand. Somewhat in contrast, *Berufsbildung* and *phronesis* are linked to a supra-individual idea of humanity that points beyond the concrete situation in action and ethical judgement.

Moments of learning linking the personal and the social

All three concepts consider moments of learning embedded in temporal relationships and emphasise the significance of the moment, the situation, the activity, or the act at specific points in time. All incorporate their understanding of the moment as a single point on a broader temporal arc of cultural, social, and personal development. This temporal structure of them highlights the importance of interaction with other people and with both symbolic and material facets of life. Studies of *phronesis*, and especially *Berufsbildung* shed additional light on the role of dialogue, whereas studies of *perezhivanie* emphasise distinctive interpretations of transformational encounters (*dramatic perezhivanie*). These situational and interactive aspects of learning seem to be crucial aspects for and in working life. According to all three concepts, the possibilities of engaging with the world in certain situations and then going beyond them through reflection seem to be just as important to the learning process as the opportunity to engage with other people.

While having definitionally distinct elements and certain areas of strengths, these three explanatory constructions have some commonalities: they refer not just to social contributions and facts but also to situations in which those occur in interaction with other people as well as with cultural and material artefacts. Each approach emphasises the personal processes of making sense in those situations.

Action, learning, feeling, and thinking cannot be separated from each other

Phronesis emphasises the inseparability of thinking, acting, and learning. With *perezhivanie*, and moments of *dramatic perezhivanie* in particular, the focus on contradictions within and between the inner and outer worlds tends to emphasise how these are “lived through” more than how they are reflected upon internally. For *Berufsbildung*, the performance of specific activities and engagement with

knowledge and cultural artefacts as expressions of humanity is central, enabling educative engagement with the world. This insight has some commonality with discussions of the role of an ideal form in educative experiences in studies of *perezhivanie*.

All three concepts deal with the relationship between action and reflection and its significance for learning. Comparison of them suggests that both direct experience and the experience of difference, contradictions, and inadequacies are important, as is the ability to distance oneself from them by producing abstract knowledge and symbolic forms. In efforts to gain certainty about the world in an abstracted form, this capacity for distance is personally founded and constructed. However, in none of these conceptual traditions can we understand this connection as a form of dualism: other than abstractly, thinking cannot be separated from action and learning, action cannot be separated from learning and thinking, and learning cannot be separated from thinking and action. Instead, all three concepts confirm some form of relational duality (or synthetic/dialectic view): the internal and external, the social and personal worlds, the inter- and intra-mental, the body and mind, and so on, are interdependent.

Being an individual in a social world always involves relational aspects that facilitate learning

All three concepts examined here arise from the intellectual challenge of understanding the relationship between the personal and the social, and how learning and development are concretely created within it. *Berufsbildung* emphasises personal growth through performing a cultivated form of work successfully and responsibly, and in doing so being connected with others in the same or related practice. *Perezhivanie* emphasises ambivalence, internal and external contradictions, and learning by acting, thinking, feeling, and changing the inner and outer worlds. *Phronesis* emphasises the specific human potential of intelligence in acting. Hence, all three concepts punctuate understandings of the relationship between the individual and the world in both shared and distinctive ways.

What emerges then is the following composite view. By building relationships with others and engaging with the cultural and material dimensions of our environment, individuals develop as they encounter the world and connect it to themselves. Through practical engagement with the world, humans build culture, develop their worldview, and cultivate their personality. A central form of practical engagement is work. Work means connecting to the world as a human being, not only through labour but also through awareness, emotions, and feelings of labouring. It is a mode of acting in the world that is about more than applying practical intelligence; it is also a way of developing this intelligence and the technical and ethical ability to judge by accounting for the situations in which work is enacted and for its local purposes. Hence, the educational value of work should be a crucial feature in thinking about learning and education, especially for adults, as working

life is usually an integral part of people's lives and their subjectivity or sense of self. Transitions in people's lives are often closely tied to their working lives. Science and culture as symbolic forms of knowledge about the world and expressions of maturity, agency in an ambivalent and contradictory world, and the ability to judge and decide one's own actions seem central to today's education, for individuals as well as for humanity and its future. The opportunity to acquire these forms of knowledge in work-related learning and educational processes should be emphasised more strongly. Such opportunities would demand that working conditions allow people to develop those capacities.

Distinctions and differences across three explanatory concepts

Berufsbildung, *perezihvane*, and *phronesis* represent three different ways of seeing the relationships between individuals in their personal development and the changing social world (of work) as dynamic. The dynamic brings about change (learning) over the course of a lifetime. As stated in the introduction, our main motivation for this attempt was our conviction that there are too few conceptual traditions that effectively take into account dimensions that are crucial for a different view of learning and a deeper understanding of adult education and development throughout the life course, including working life. Specifically, commencing from the idea that a sound analysis should be able to recognise, address, and integrate the three closely interrelated dimensions of adult learning and development: the relationships between phenomena within and outside formalised education (school education, training, etc.); the relations of practical action, sense, meaning, and even wisdom; and, more broadly still, the relations of intra-psychological (the personal cognitive, embodied, emotional, and biographical) and inter-psychological (the social, cultural and institutional) dynamics.

Our comparison of these three concepts has highlighted how their complexity offers promising approaches to understanding learning in the reciprocal relationships among the individual, the world of work, and society. This chapter has sought to further develop these ideations for understanding learning through and for working life, aware that they are variously shaped by culture, language, disciplinary and epistemic perspectives, and historical and social imperatives and fashions. Through a systemic and comparative engagement with these concepts, important similarities and overlaps have been identified, as well as distinctions, and four broad insights into the relationship between learning, the individual, work, and society are proposed. These insights, we maintain, have the potential to contribute to a better understanding of adult learning throughout and for working life, including concurrently negotiated relationships between the individual and society.

Applying the four insights from the conceptual dialogue to understanding and explaining the parameters for adults' learning and education in a changing world of work shows that it is essential for adults to develop both their human agency

and their ability to make (ethical) judgements (1). Working in a changing world of work provides moments when the relationship between the individual and the social becomes apparent through interactions with others in establishing new work practices and negotiating the meaning of these (changing) work practices (2). Working in a changing environment and participating in its transformation requires intentionality in thought and action, learning and disposition. It is therefore both a process of change in the workplace and a process of personal transformation (3). Due to their relational nature, experiences in a changing world of work are moments that stimulate learning in practical and personal terms by prompting those affected to engage with and contribute to this changing world of work based on their own judgements and through their actions (4).

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12

LIFE TRANSITIONS, DAILY LIVING, AND TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Insights From a Migration Journey

Chad Hoggan and Tetyana Hoggan-Kloubert

A core theme in the literature on transformative learning (TL) addresses processes that can contribute to, might be necessary for, or should be included in this kind of learning. Often foregrounded are reflective or introspective processes such as critical self-reflection (Mezirow, 2000), soul work (Dirkx, 2001), and narrative reconstruction (Hoggan-Kloubert, 2024). We agree that reflection and introspection do – and should – play an important role. However, there is an essential feature of transformation that, although present in the literature in different forms, is usually given a subordinate role, and that is daily lived experience.

The likely reason for foregrounding reflective and introspective processes is that most approaches to TL emanate from constructivist and psychoanalytic perspectives (Fenwick, 2000). The constructivist perspective “casts the individual as a central actor in a drama of personal meaning-making. The learner reflects on lived experience and then interprets and generalises this experience to form mental structures” (p. 248). The psychoanalytic perspective also focuses on this meaning-making but focuses on the “invisible . . . psychic events that are not available to the conscious mind, including the desires and position of the reflecting ‘I’ respective to the reflected-on ‘me’” (p. 250). There is a third perspective, also used by many scholars, which is called the situative perspective (Fenwick, 2000). In this view, “learning is rooted in the situation in which a person participates, not in the head of that person as intellectual concepts produced by reflection nor as inner energies produced by psychic conflicts” (p. 253).

Admittedly eclectic, we look for insights that each of these perspectives has to offer (Hoggan, 2019). Individuals are indeed capable of reflection (constructivist), are embodied beings with “invisible psychic events” that profoundly influence us (psychoanalytic), and are also unalterably social beings in a physical world, for

whom daily social and physical activity are inseparable from what we know, what we experience, and how we think and exist in the world (situative).

Nevertheless, since most of the literature on TL stems from the first two perspectives, in this chapter, we foreground a more situative perspective, arguing that transformative learning is deeply embedded within specific contexts and unfolds through interactions with the environment and other people. This approach is particularly relevant when examining significant life changes such as migration, which can trigger profound transformations. Migration, as a profound and life-altering event, serves as an exemplary case for exploring these dynamics. Specifically, we delve into the experiences of a Ukrainian woman who emigrated from there in 2022 seeking asylum. Through analysis of data from biographical interviews conducted shortly after her migration and then three years later in 2025, we illustrate how transformative learning unfolds over time within the situative perspective. We begin by presenting four ways in which the role of daily lived experiences in transformative learning is treated in the literature. Then, we present the story of a Ukrainian refugee living in Germany, organised and told through those four lenses. Finally, we explore implications for theory and practice.

Treatments of Daily Lived Experiences in the TL Literature

As the seminal theory of TL, Mezirow's (2000) theory of perspective transformation has profoundly influenced subsequent TL literature. He pointed to the role of daily lived experiences in the TL process when he listed phases of transformation such as exploring options, planning a course of action, trying on new roles, and building competence and confidence. However, apart from including these steps in his 10-phase process, Mezirow never elaborated on these processes nor gave them much attention. The broader literature of TL has largely followed this lead, though there is some TL scholarship that addresses different aspects of the role of daily living, framed in various ways. We present four of these ways that can be found in the literature: changing contexts, daily activities and routines, social activities and interactions, and navigating liminality.

Changing contexts

Changes to one's life situations unsurprisingly bring with them demands for learning because one must adapt to the new situations. The challenges posed (or even just the differences experienced) often call for a degree of learning that can rightly be described as *transformative*. As Roger Gould (1991) said, when adults go through life transitions, they must adapt to a "*whole new set of circumstances*", and this is what often spurs personal change (p. 134).

TL scholars often point to major changes to the contexts in which we live, including loss, displacement, unemployment, retirement, combat, life-threatening illness, or marriage (Akpumojé et al., 2022; Hoggan, 2014). They point to ways in which

these context-changing events lead to processes of “sensory knowing, observation, spirituality, interaction, emotive knowing, connected knowing, and intuition” that lead to profound life changes (Akpumojie et al., 2022, p. 603). Hoggan (2014) argues that adaptation to the disruptions and challenges of a life-threatening illness, for example, provoke experiences of “crisis” and necessitate processes of “coping.” It is only when the most difficult of these experiences are over that one really begins “engagement” processes or “conscious efforts to grapple mentally with the implications of their illness experience (p. 198).

A change in context can also occur in the form of physical movement – as in the case of travelling. It is a common maxim and a ubiquitous theme in the research literature that travel can bring about momentous changes in people (Stone & Duffy, 2015). In encountering different cultures, we gain awareness that our own culture represents only one way of doing things, rather than the natural and obvious way that things should be.

Finally, the perception of our context can shift drastically simply when our positionality within it has changed. In these cases, the context itself is not necessarily different but the person’s position within it has shifted. For example, cancer patients often experience a dramatic alteration in their context – not because their home or work has changed but rather because they change from a “social normal” (Colyer, 1996) to a cancer patient and “as cancer (affects) their perceived positionalities within society” (Hoggan, 2014, p. 201).

This, in turn, can profoundly shape senses of identity. Morrice (2013) highlights the profound effect of the social context on refugees. The abrupt change in environment and societal structures often leads to a redefinition of their place in the world. This process involves a potential loss of previously held social status and financial autonomy, requiring a difficult adaptation to a new reality – a painful adjustment – which she refers to as the “darker side of transformative learning” (p. 252). “Realising that the cultural capital that had enabled them to achieve professional, social, and economic success in their own country was not valued in (their new country) was a painful and bitter experience” for the refugees (p. 263).

Thus, when one is thrust into an unknown social system and experiences a dramatic change in social status and treatment, especially after losing everything (both tangible and social) that one has built and accumulated, one is not simply choosing to reflect on differences in social systems, social strata, and loss but rather experiencing all those things (and more) simultaneously.

Daily activities and routines

Although seemingly minor, small steps taken in a new situation can accumulate and lead to major changes in how individuals approach their daily lives. Daily activities create opportunities for individuals to “reorganise and reorient” their personal lives (Alhadeff-Jones, 2021, p. 319). Engaging in daily activities during a

crisis challenges individuals to move from the point of initial freezing or “lingering on” (Mälkki, 2019) and engage in a new search for meaning.

Changes to daily activities and routines can have long-term transformative effects. The process of radicalisation, for example, is strongly “connected to daily life practices, to the experiences of separation and discrimination that we witness, and in which we are sometimes immersed in the concrete contexts of life and work” (Caramellino et al., 2022, p. 774).

Nohl (2009) argues that seemingly insignificant spontaneous actions can also be powerful catalysts for long-lasting personal change when they translate into new daily routines. He introduced the concept of serendipity into transformative learning, whereby individuals gain valuable insights and opportunities through unplanned encounters and activities. In this concept, an embracing of the unexpected can involve making room for “not knowing” what needs to be learned or what the end result might be and instead being open to an exploratory process. He illustrates how seemingly minor events (trying a new style of dancing or learning a new musical genre), if they become central aspects of the person’s daily life, can lead to the emergence of new biographical orientations. However, simply being open to new experiences is not enough. Individuals also need to make a certain break from their established routines and ways of thinking. This openness can stem from various life experiences, such as milieu disintegration (uprooting from familiar surroundings because of migration) or exclusion from established patterns (e.g., because of retirement). Furthermore, these actions can lead to new social connections (Nohl, 2009).

The role of social activity and influences

Perspectives on learning that foreground social activity often have one or more of the following features (Bracci et al., 2021, p. 296). First, a focus on processes, specifically, what individuals do in practice. Second, an emphasis on the social aspects of learning, locating the process of knowing not within the individual mind but rather in a social context. Third, an acknowledgement of the disorderly nature of learning, often using terms like *uncertainty*, *conflict*, and *incoherence* in their description of learning. Fourth, a recognition and foregrounding of knowledge within a specific time and place. Furthermore, social activity perspectives consider the material, artefactual, and historical elements of social life essential to understanding how knowing and learning develop in practice (Bracci et al., 2021).

Much of the writing from this perspective has followed the seminal work on situated learning and communities of practice by Lave and Wenger (1991). The latter argue that through participation in social practices, individuals not only learn specific skills and knowledge but also develop a sense of identity, and they emphasise the transition from novice to expert within a community of practice. This transition is characterised by the concept of “legitimate peripheral participation” in which newcomers engage in entry-level tasks endorsed by the community.

These tasks are initial steps in the trajectory of their participation and lead gradually to more demanding roles until they achieve competence and full membership within the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991, pp. 97–99). Ideally, communities of practice offer a supportive environment in which individuals can experiment with new behaviours and ideas.

The participation trajectory in communities of practice is not merely a matter of imitating existing practices. Newcomers not only learn new skills but also contribute to the identity and growth of the community in new ways. This transition involves negotiating differences and commonalities between established and new members, which sometimes leads to tensions between them (Hodge, 2014, p. 169). There have been critiques of Lave and Wenger's (1991) original conception of membership trajectories for assuming a linear progression leading to full membership within a community of practice. However, Wenger's (1998) subsequent research introduced additional trajectories such as the "peripheral", "insider", "boundary", and "outbound" within organisational contexts. These trajectories acknowledge the diverse pathways individuals may take in their journeys of learning and identity formation.

Hodge (2014) suggests that transformative learning can be viewed as an "inter-practice" phenomenon whereby individuals experience learning as they move between different social practices. For Hodge, "a practice-to-practice trajectory may become transformative if one practice must be disavowed prior to entry or as a condition of entry into another" (p. 174).

What is distinctive about a transformative trajectory is that, for the individual on it, there are tensions or conflicts at the level of the tacit understandings of each practice, which force them to renounce the assumptions of one social practice before or in order to embrace the assumptions of another. Incompatibility at the level of tacit understandings of social practices is a condition of the transformative potential of the "inter-practice" space.

(2014, p. 178)

Also in this vein are scholars working on migration research. Webb (2017) describes poignantly the "hidden injuries" of migration, when migrants must "relinquish their previous identities and practices (unless they are Anglophone) and adapt their perspectives and practices to the new ways of the host employer" (p. 172). However, when social relationships are more equal and voluntary than most workplaces allow, the migrant experience opens up possibilities for mutual intercultural learning.

Navigating liminality

During sudden life upheavals, many taken-for-granted aspects of our lives are called into question. These can include physical realities (e.g., the destruction of

our homes or our country), but central to the process of transformation is when the patterns of one's meaning-making no longer suffice. This is especially existential because the ways we understand the world and our place in it are integral to who we are. As Green (2012) describes it, "we are not solid, inert things; our constancy requires continual construction. We 'compose' ourselves. We hold ourselves and our world together" (p. 202). In doing so, we draw upon certain "master meanings" that are preconscious and anchored in the psyche. These serve as our touchstones and produce repeating patterns for making sense of our experiences and the world. In doing so, they also shape our identities (p. 202–203). When these patterns of self-composition are shown to be inadequate, or for any other reason dissolve, we enter a liminal zone situated between "the known but inadequate, and the unknown and possibly adequate" (p. 209). It is a place of no longer knowing and not yet knowing.

This focus on liminality often appears in the constructivist and psychoanalytic perspectives, but it is also relevant to situative perspectives, because to function normally or even to be able to reason, we need stable external reference points upon which we can rely (e.g., norms, practices, institutions). In a liminal situation of crisis, however, such stability is necessarily suspended (Szokolczai, 2017). It can thus be difficult to think one's way out of liminality. A better approach is to be present with the ambiguity that has arisen from the collapse of former meaning structures in order to "notice the tension and the unresolved without the compulsion or pressure to achieve closure and resolution" (Green, 2022, p. 119).

In the context of migration, we see transformative learning emerging as a continuous, dynamic process driven by changing contexts, daily routines, social interactions, and the experience of liminality. These elements together facilitate the reconfiguration of identity, adaptation to new environments, and the reconstruction of meaning in life.

Oksana's Story: The Beginning

Having reviewed several ways that transformative learning has been described as occurring through processes of daily living, we turn now to the experiences of Oksana, a Ukrainian war refugee in Germany. These data were gathered as part of a larger research study of 15 Ukrainians who fled their homes in the wake of the Russian invasion of 2022. The interviews were conducted by the authors and translated into English to facilitate analysis. Semi-structured biographical interviews with Oksana took place in June 2022 and February 2025, both of which lasted three hours. After a brief overview, we examine her experiences through the four lenses just described. We begin with data from the initial interview and then provide insights from the follow-up interview.

Oksana grew up in the central part of Ukraine. At 58 years of age, she was a successful paediatrician with an excellent reputation. A confident and independent woman, she managed a paediatric medical practice, had strong family, social,

and business networks, and was a respected member of her community. Then, in February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. Missiles destroyed her clinic, and she was forced to flee in the face of an invading army. She spent days travelling by bus and train and slept in provisional refugee beds as well as on benches in train and bus stations.

After two weeks of arduous travel, Oksana arrived somewhat randomly in the city of Augsburg in southern Germany. She had never even heard of this city; she simply took whatever bus or train was available as she sought to escape the war as quickly as possible. She arrived in Augsburg travel-worn and numb, having lost everything except the suitcase in her hand. She was greeted at the main train station by signs welcoming Ukrainian refugees and directing her to where she could secure free meals, a temporary place to live, and assistance filling in the forms required by the state bureaucracy and to secure long-term financial assistance and housing.

Her initial few weeks were filled with shock and grief but also with urgent demands. Most of Europe, including Germany and her new city of Augsburg, were supportive, yet she nevertheless felt herself on the cusp of ruin. She had no money, no property, no business, and no job. Local non-government organisations helped her to secure a place to stay and a regular income so she could buy food and necessities. However, there were no prospects in sight to markedly improve her situation, much less to return to her “normal” – now former – life. Because she did not speak German, the only people with whom she could communicate were other Ukrainian refugees, so she developed a community with them. Outside that community, she felt helpless, useless, and isolated.

Changing contexts

Oksana’s context changed in several important ways, including moving from one country and culture to another. There were certainly differences in her surroundings, both physical and cultural, to which she was forced to adapt immediately. However, the change in her social situation brought about by the move to another country seems to have been more important: not only were her surroundings different but also she did not have the knowledge necessary to function effectively in the new environments and therefore felt seen and treated very differently from what she was used to.

You know, my work used to be such a big part of who I am. I mean, it was not just a job; it was like my whole thing. Back then, I felt like I was in the right place. People respected what I did, and I was helping others. It gave my life real meaning. But things changed, and now I’m in a very different world. People don’t see me the same way anymore. I feel like I am needy, helpless. I can’t do anything for myself. It is not easy because I used to feel capable. Now I’m trying to figure out where I fit in.

From being at home in a system she understood, she became immersed in an alien system. All the many ways of functioning and accomplishing needed tasks that she took for granted in her previous life were now of little use. The change to her physical location meant a dramatic decrease in her ability to function. Increased life demands can provoke growth, as we adapt to them (Kegan, 1998). In such a case, it is not so much that we have switched to a different context, but that our context evolves to make more or different demands on us.

A change in social status was disorienting for Oksana. She had been a practising paediatrician who enjoyed a relatively high social status. After fleeing to Germany, she was not only no longer able to practice medicine (because professional credentials are not necessarily recognised by other states) but also was unemployed and, at least initially, unemployable. She became a recipient of social welfare, reliant on the generosity of others for her survival. Worse yet, although many Germans were sympathetic and supportive of Ukrainian refugees, there were also many locals (especially recent migrants of Russian descent) who openly protested against Ukrainian refugees and/or in favour of the Russian aggression.

The change to Oksana's social positionality brought with it changes in social recognition, illustrating the unpredictability of displacement, the need for constant adaptation, and how personal agency is sometimes lost in the chaos.

I always held leadership positions at work, was very active in general, and used to the fact that I could resolve any situation, always made decisions quite easily, took responsibility. . . . And when the war started, for the first day or so I couldn't function at all.

The contrast between previous stability and new uncertainties underscores the disruption that war causes to one's sense of direction and control. Also, in the unfamiliar settings in which Oksana finds herself, she must place her trust in strangers, encompassing a shift from self-reliance to a network-based survival strategy. In this situation, adaptability and social connections become essential coping mechanisms.

Daily activities and routines

Establishing new habits in a foreign environment helped Oksana regain a sense of control and normality. Everyday actions such as organising living spaces, finding familiar foods, engaging in work or volunteer activities, or even structuring a daily schedule were stabilising activities that contributed to her emotional and psychological adjustment. Over time, these activities might foster a sense of belonging or even reinforce a new identity that incorporates both past and present experiences. Through such processes, learning occurs gradually, for instance, when Oksana developed skills to navigate different systems, integrate new cultural norms, and build resilience in her daily interactions.

Recalling her early days at the refugee camp, Oksana described a state of inactivity. She spent days in bed, sleeping and only getting up to eat and to browse the Internet. "I slept, lay down, surfed the internet, slept again, ate, and did nothing else. That's how I recovered after the journey." She talked about an initial state of paralysis, where media consumption replaced normal activities due to overwhelming anxiety. Not until she reached out to Oleg (a pseudonym), a volunteer at the refugee camp, did her daily living develop into a routine and help her to orient herself.

[Oleg] told me it was important to rest, to explore, and to take care of myself and that they would handle everything else. Following his advice, I started going on tours, visiting gardens and museums, and using a translator to learn about things that interested me. This helped me feel more relaxed and allowed me to understand things better through visuals.

For Oksana, taking time to rest and to dabble in new, unpragmatic explorations was a necessary pause in her transition. She gradually regained energy, clarity, and confidence to proceed with her next actions. Through encouragement from others to take the time to rest and to heal, as well as through her own willingness to engage with new activities and environments, Oksana felt able to acclimate to and appreciate her new home.

Gradually, we finished the paperwork and I got a place to stay; this changed everything for me, even though I felt powerless before. Despite feeling tired at first, now I continue to explore [the area] whenever I can. I found my way. . . . I now feel very comfortable with this German precision, with visual order everywhere. I wasn't used to seeing such order everywhere before. Ukraine is more relaxed in this regard. Everything here is well-organised and clean.

Oksana's description of daily life reflects a process of rebuilding a sense of normality in new surroundings. Germany's structured environment contrasted with the chaos left behind, providing a sense of security. At the same time, everyday routines, even mundane or exhausting ones, became a form of coping.

I wake up very early, as usual, immediately monitor our groups, and help people remotely. I even had to treat a child online, as the mother was in a panic and wasn't able to reach anyone. Lalya, almost three years old, had a high fever. I kept her stable for a couple days, and everything ended well. There was a case when I came across a message that people had arrived from Ukraine to Augsburg at 4 o'clock in the morning and didn't know where to go. They had also been traveling for several days, and there were no volunteers or anyone at the station at that time. I gave them coordinates and directions to the camp, my favourite one. I received a message of thanks from those people.

These new routines helped her to regain a sense of control over her life in an unfamiliar place.

Social activities and interactions

After settling into the refugee camp and establishing a new daily routine, Oksana began to visit a local NGO that supported refugees. By participating in this community, Oksana was able to connect with other refugees who understood her struggles and were able to offer empathy and support. She also interacted with local volunteers who provided guidance and resources and helped her navigate her new environment. Thanks in part to this social activity, she has developed a fascination for daily life in Germany, the organisation of the city, and the beauty of the parks and architecture.

People often ask me . . . about my future plans. I tell them that I have no plans. I can't decide whether I'll stay. I consider it a fruitless expenditure of emotional energy because we don't have enough facts to make a decision right now. I just live – minute by minute and day by day. Thinking about planning ahead is not rational, so I conserve my energy, do what I can, and try to be as helpful as possible.

As Oksana engaged with the NGO, she began to incorporate new practices into her everyday routine. The consistent participation in these routines reinforced her learning and enabled her ongoing transformation. She then became a volunteer with the NGO.

I first reached out to the local NGO that supports Ukrainian refugees – and I asked for help. I found myself frequently visiting their offices seeking help and support. I then began interacting more with others who were in similar situations – people seeking help there just like me. In these conversations, I found that I had something to offer. Maybe it was providing medical advice based on my background or simply sharing my own experiences. But I realised I could do something around me. One day, the NGO asked me whether I could come and assist regularly with their consultations. It was a moment for me. This was a moment to give back. Since then, I've committed to coming in regularly. There are days when I wake up feeling drained and lacking any energy. But the thought of my scheduled duty with the volunteers pushes me to get out of bed and show up.

Social interactions become a means of survival and emotional support. The formation of new connections with fellow refugees fosters a sense of belonging, while acts of assistance – both giving and receiving – contribute to a sense of purpose. “Our volunteer centre is my unpaid debt to Ukraine, probably. I didn't have the

strength there, but here I go when I have the opportunity.” Volunteering is also a way to reclaim agency and reconnect with the homeland, even from afar. From the interviews, we infer that Oksana feels a sense of responsibility to her home country and tries to contribute through volunteering, even in a new environment.

Liminality

Oksana’s experiences of sudden relocation and uncertainty highlight the navigation of liminality in daily life. In this case, there is a physical state of liminality – the dormitory setting where the war refugees lived while awaiting longer-term housing. But more important are the ways that she describes her condition during this time. Whereas the physical conditions shaped her concrete realities, they are also analogous to her mental and emotional state of liminality.

At first, I was in shock and didn’t want to hear or talk about anything even though I had questions. We were supposed to decide something on our own, but I apologised and went to my room. It was already evening, and I was in such an incomprehensible state the whole evening. . . . Among all those who come here, there are no healthy people. At best, we are in depressive states, and at worst, it’s severe post-traumatic psychological impressions. Some cope better, some 50/50, some don’t cope at all [depending on] their individual abilities.

In the temporary shelter, Ukrainian refugees immediately established their own personal spaces and decorated them with familiar items. The shelter was a transitional residence – a threshold between past and future contexts.

Many of us were settled in this dormitory. I just watched as people started bringing various household items that give you comfort and a sense of normality: some towels, some tablecloths, some napkins. We lived here for a month after we were settled. Soon rumours started circulating that we would be relocated to another place. Everyone was in panic. But it was illogical because it wasn’t just one or two people but everyone who was in shock. That’s because relocation is a bit like psychological and emotional death. . . . Volunteers confirmed to us that we would be relocated to a home for the elderly. However, this was closer to the city centre, which was nice. But the issue wasn’t about being closer to the centre; we wanted to be left in peace, at least for a bit. We hadn’t recovered from these suitcases and moves in this period. . . . We are not cattle that you drive. And then suddenly pack up and move us to another address in two days. Maybe people wouldn’t have brought those things or prepared themselves for the idea that they would live here for some time.

The place of liminality is not a comfortable one. The dormitories in which the Ukrainian refugees were housed temporarily were not the homes in which they

were accustomed to living. Those homes were cherished in memories, grieved for, and missed. But they were also now either destroyed or inaccessible. So, the women put out tiny remnants and reminders of their former homes. In the new place, they could not live their daily lives as they always had, nor could they really begin to forge their new lives. They had a place to stay, food to eat, and existential crises to contemplate. Even in such conditions, the road ahead was terrifying; the anticipation of relocation to larger and more central residences induced emotional turmoil akin to an emotional “little death.”

A major contributing factor to Oksana’s sense of liminality was the fact that she could not speak the local language. “I really regret not knowing the language now. I usually manage, but I feel uncomfortable being limited in information and communication.” She seemed to be physically present in a new country but emotionally tied to the homeland. There was ongoing uncertainty about the future, difficulties integrating due to language barriers, and also an instinct to create a familiar environment.

Oksana’s Story – Three Years Later

Three years after her initial escape from Ukraine to Augsburg, we met Oksana again to see how her experiences and learning had evolved over time. She still is unable to find a job in the medical profession, struggling with language barriers, and therefore hindered in her potential to integrate and to develop social bonds outside of her Ukrainian community. While Oksana has achieved a degree of practical integration, the emotional and embodied dimensions of her transition remain complex and fraught with liminality. She describes herself as existing in an in-between space, caught between two worlds – no longer fully belonging to Ukraine, yet unable to call Germany her home. “When I think about it”, she says, “I feel like there is no place for me on the planet Earth. I do not belong in Ukraine anymore, and here, I do not feel at home either.”

Despite this emotional detachment, Oksana has rationally and intellectually embraced life in Germany. She takes comfort in the structure, organisation, and predictability of German bureaucracy. She says that she finds satisfaction in Germany’s rigid regulations and systematic procedures that defined her previous medical work environment in Ukraine. “Germany – that is me,” she asserts. “I love everything here. I love the bureaucracy, the strict regulations, the adherence to protocols. Everything here, that is me.” Her daily routine provides her with a sense of stability. She takes long walks through the city, immersing herself in its serene atmosphere. “If paradise exists on Earth, it is in Augsburg,” she muses. Yet, she acknowledges that she cannot fully experience this paradise.

One of the biggest challenges she continues to face is language. Though she has been learning German for three years, she still finds herself struggling in basic conversations. She describes feeling “paralysed” when attempting to express herself, often falling into moments of silence as her mind freezes under the pressure to

communicate. This liminal state also includes her embodied experience. While her mind has embraced the logic and structure of her new environment, her body seems to resist full assimilation. The most striking example of this is her experience with the German language. Despite her efforts to learn, she experienced hearing loss during her language course. She understands this as a somatic manifestation of her struggle to fully internalise the language and, perhaps, the culture it represents. “For months in my German language course,” she explained, “I experienced hearing loss, my body did not want to accept German, I knew that I could not master this language.” This somatic resistance suggests a deep-seated emotional response to the challenges of integration.

The struggle is intertwined with feelings of both gratitude and guilt. Oksana acknowledges the safety and opportunities that Germany has provided, yet this gratitude is undermined by a sense of guilt for not fully feeling at home, for not being able to fully embrace her new reality. She is caught between the trauma of her past and the uncertainty of the future, wanting to express gratitude while simultaneously grappling with profound loss and displacement.

Socially, Oksana’s sense of belonging has become increasingly fragile. She once worked actively in the local migrant support group, helping newly arrived refugees adjust to life in Germany. However, as the arrival of refugees decreased, the organisation no longer needed to offer this programme and Oksana found herself without a clear role. “I need to feel needed”, she says. “Someone has to need me. But no one does.” This sense of diminished purpose underscores the importance of social integration not only in terms of building connections but also in terms of finding a sense of agency and contributing to the community.

Despite this, Oksana acknowledges the many social opportunities available to her. Her neighbours invite her to birthday celebrations and other gatherings, offering her a chance to integrate. “I often fall into a stupor,” she explained, “I freeze when I need to say something in German. . . . I regret and feel helpless that I cannot tell my neighbours about my life, that I cannot have a dialogue with them at eye level.” This inability to communicate her experiences and to build reciprocal relationships reinforces her sense of liminality, preventing her from fully establishing a sense of belonging to her new community. Her story reflects the profound and often painful reality of adjusting to a new country – where the mind adapts faster than the body and where feeling at home remains an elusive goal.

Implications and Conclusion

Oksana’s narrative, as described in this chapter, deepens our understanding of transformative learning through the foregrounding of the role of everyday lived experience as the medium and the site of profound change. Situating her story within the broader discourse on transformative learning, this chapter challenges the dominance of primarily cognitive or introspective models and advocates for a reconfiguration that embraces the complex, situative, and dynamic nature of everyday life.

Oksana's experience as a migrant tells of a drastic shift from control and normality to uncertainty and incomprehension. Her daily practices – exploring her surroundings, interacting with locals, engaging with an NGO, and maintaining routines – demonstrate how these activities facilitate adaptation, resilience, and a deeper understanding of her new reality. Transformative learning is embedded in this continuous process of navigating life's challenges, not confined to isolated reflections.

The role of *changing contexts* was initially significant, but their importance diminished over time as the novelty wore off. Whether a new context feels as normal as the previous one depends on individual circumstances and duration. Initially, Oksana emphasised the differences between her old and new lives, but three years later, she simply acknowledged them intellectually, even expressing preference for some aspects of her life in Germany, like the order and bureaucracy. While her struggle with lack of professional recognition faded, her desire to feel useful grew, influencing the meaning she found in her life.

The *daily activities and routines* and *social activities and interactions* seemed to play very similar roles. Routines provide stability and predictability, influencing both immediate experiences and long-term outcomes. Oksana's time at the NGO exemplifies this: her volunteer work fostered a sense of community with fellow refugees and gave her a sense of purpose. The disruption of this routine, however, resulted in a painful loss of meaning. Similarly, her inability to communicate with neighbours due to language barriers led to feelings of disconnection. Daily routines are powerful shapers of our lives.

Liminality is perhaps the most prominent theme in Oksana's story. At the beginning, she was lost in liminality, unable to make sense of her experiences and unable to function in her present environment. After three years, although now able to do both of those things, liminality remains a prominent feature of her experience. She has intellectually embraced her new life, but emotionally, somatically, and linguistically she remains caught in between. Ukraine no longer feels like home, but neither does Germany. A bridge is needed to fully integrate her into the new context (in her case, the German language), and we would generalise that full integration into any new context can be impeded by certain key learning challenges.

Understanding the transformative potential of daily living has major implications for personal and societal development. For example, support programmes for people in transition (e.g., migrants) can be designed in such a way that they provide not only basic necessities but also opportunities for meaningful engagement and social interaction, thereby fostering a sense of community and belonging through volunteer work, art activities, participation in clubs, and self-help groups. Educational institutions can create non-formal learning opportunities through targeted (i.e., purposeful and intentional) activities as well as options for the (serendipitous) exploration of new activities. Workshops, community projects, and peer support groups can provide platforms for individuals to share experiences, learn from one

another, and develop social networks. Helping people in transition to develop a sense of belonging, agency, and power to shape their social and political worlds can be promoted through community forums, citizen assemblies, and neighbourhood councils, all of which provide meaningful civic activities.

When individuals engage in participatory activities such as community service or local governance, they not only enhance their personal growth but also contribute to improving their communities (Schugurensky, 2010; Berry et al., 1993). For society to benefit from the transformative potential of daily activities, it is important to think about how to create places of learning and civic activity, places of encounter and participation, and places that encourage and facilitate social engagement and community involvement.

As emphasised in much of the literature on transformative learning, reflective activities are crucibles of deeper understanding and the integration of new perspectives. However, they often follow prolonged periods of crisis and coping (Hoggan, 2014). During these periods, individuals must navigate immediate challenges and uncertainties, which are integral to the transformative process. The phases of crisis and coping are not merely precursors to reflection but also critical components of transformation in themselves (Hoggan, 2014). By acknowledging the importance of these elements, we can better understand and support the complex processes of transformation that occur during major life transitions.

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13

WORK-RELATED LEARNING AS AN ITERATIVE PROCESS OF RELATING WORK AND LEARNING

Katrin Kraus

Lifelong Learning in Post-Industrial Societies

The transformation of industrial societies is characterised as the transition of modern society into “late modernity,” in which individualisation, uncertainty, and risk play increasingly significant roles (Beck, 2009; Giddens, 2015). These are characterised as network (Castells, 2009) or information societies (Bell, 1991) in which the previous main source of productivity and wealth – industrial production – is replaced by increasingly immaterial modes of production. Zygmunt Bauman (2013) later termed this “liquid modernity.” His conception expresses the fundamental structure of the transformation, decreasing permanence and certainty that are accompanied by loss of meaning, of stabilising expectations of the individual in social relationships, and of standardised norms and roles. Conformity to standardised roles and institutionalised life courses (Kohli, 2007) have become less important than individuality and flexibility. Richard Sennett (1999) predicted that the consequences for individuals would be loss of character. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2005) argue that there has been a corresponding shift in what is expected of employees in this new capitalism. The standardised regimes of industrial society changed at the end of the 20th century, and with them so did the demands placed on employees (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). Instead of loyalty and punctuality, creativity and authenticity are increasingly valued as expressions of subjective commitment in gainful employment (Bannwart et al., 2021; Kraus, 2004). In this post-industrial society, transitions have multiplied and become a standard characteristic of working life (Akkermans et al., 2024).

The concept of lifelong learning entered the scene and became, by the turn of the century, the “new educational order” (Field, 2000). With the social and economic

transformation since the 1970s, lifelong learning has become a topic of educational policy discourse and a political programme at the international and national level (Edwards & Usher, 2001; Elfert & Ydesen, 2023; Hof, 2026; Kraus, 2002). Critical analyses of this discourse reveal a shift in this discourse and its political agenda, from a relatively holistic approach in the beginning to an understanding of lifelong learning as an “individual task rather than as a collective project and that this has transformed lifelong learning from a right to a duty” (Biesta, 2006, p. 169). Mainly due to the global higher participation of girls and women in formal education and the growing importance of (mainly non-formal) further education overall (McLean, 2022), lifelong learning has become an increasingly important part of the goals and policies of education systems in many countries (Benasso et al., 2022). Several overview articles have recently been published on the development of the lifelong learning discourse since the 1970s in politics and academia (Holford et al., 2022; Nuißl & Sava, 2024; Thwe & Kálmán, 2024). They note that lifelong learning is now present in both international education policy and academic discourse. Nevertheless, there are still few empirical studies on the phenomenon of lifelong learning and, therefore, policy-related and conceptual publications predominate. To better understand the phenomenon of lifelong learning, studies are needed that go beyond the political dimension of the programme to view it as a process of ongoing learning across the life course. Lifelong learning is part of human practice for a range of personal reasons (Hof, 2022). Learning is an expression of living, and how learning is enacted over the course of life is part of the social dimension of the individual (Billett, 2023a).

Here, the relationship with work comes into play, and there is a need for a theoretical understanding of work-related learning as a practice of lifelong learning (Kraus, 2022a). After all, work is an important element in life, offering various learning opportunities and incentives, especially for adults, to learn and to develop their competences, which are central to many working-age adults’ subjectivity or sense of self. Not surprisingly, “learning in, through and for work” is considered one of the central themes in the lifelong learning discourse (Holford et al., 2022). A growing number of studies investigate lifelong learning as a practice in working life, including informal learning at the workplace. Many of them are conducted in fields such as the teaching professions (Nissilä et al., 2022; Özyildirim et al., 2025), health care professions (Stabel et al., 2022), and other knowledge-intensive services such as employment and staffing services (Karhapää et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2024). These studies demonstrate that work-related learning is an important part of lifelong learning and vice versa, that work-related learning evolves in working life throughout the occupational biography. These studies reconstructively analyse the processes of work-related learning in particular fields. However, there is no theoretical framework in which the two constitutive elements of work-related learning, namely work and learning, are systematically related to one another and thus described analytically. Such a framework would enable an analysis of work-related learning that takes into account its various facets, which

arise from specific forms of relating learning and work. This would make it possible to analyse work-related learning as a concrete form of social practice in lifelong learning.

This chapter aims to develop such a theoretical framework.¹ In doing so, it contributes to the debate by bridging the concepts of lifelong learning, education, and work-related learning from the perspective of employees. It examines how employees continually rebalance work and learning throughout their working lives, engaging in work-related learning as a practice of lifelong learning, and pursuing different modes of work-related learning to develop continuously their competences. It provides a theoretical framework for the relational specification of different modes of work-related learning, which can be systematically distinguished according to the specific relationship between work and learning. That relationship can be located on the continuum from fusion to transition, and against the background of the changes in industrial society described earlier, it has become a task for employees to constantly re-establish these relations. The focus here lies in the complex task of establishing the relationships between work and learning that constitute work-related learning. The chapter describes this as a capacity of employees which has received too little attention to date. With this approach, later introduced as the iterative process of work-related learning, it brings together situated learning, which focuses on individual learning as part of the social dynamic of a group and a commonly enacted task, and lifelong learning, which emphasises the personal process of learning throughout one's lifetime in various forms (Bjursell, 2025). The capacity to associate learning and work is essential today. Education studies must understand this capacity if they are to assist employees in cultivating the capacity to relate work and learning throughout their working lives. This understanding of work-related learning opens up a broader conception of learning, shifting the perspective from a traditional focus on formal learning in the youth phase to encompassing all areas of lifelong learning (the life-wide dimension of learning) and also considers learning in adulthood (the life-long dimension of learning).

In the following sections, an anthropological argument is developed that considers the capacity for work as a configuration. The following section introduces the relationship between work and learning as part of an iterative process of work-related learning across a lifetime and outlines the temporal and spatial dimensions of this iterative process. The next sections emphasise the importance of relating work and learning as a capacity of employees, and provide some concrete examples. The conclusion discusses the relevance of iterative work-related learning processes from an education science perspective and explores possibilities for pedagogical action in this context.

Work, Livelihood, and Meaning

That human beings must engage in activities to secure their livelihood is an anthropological given (Kraus, 2009). However, from an individual perspective, gainful

activity not only satisfies economic needs (Weber, 1980, p. 48) but also facilitates social integration, provides meaning, creates a sense of identity, and gives structure to everyday life (Senghaas-Knobloch, 1999). Furthermore, according to Hannah Arendt, human beings are actively engaged with the world not only out of material necessity but because, as human beings, they do not merely satisfy their basic needs but also shape the world around them, make it their home, and organise their coexistence with others (Arendt, 2003).

This anthropological fact, the need to earn a living and the search for meaningful activity, can also be viewed from a social perspective. Societies have cultivated and institutionalised different ways in which members of society can do this. Throughout history, cultural and societal activities have been institutionalised to pursue specific livelihoods (i.e., for occupations), each accompanied by certain prerequisites in terms of individual working capacities and forms to build them (Billett, 2022; Kraus, 2006). The opportunities for earning a living, the associated demands on people, and the chances for individuals to acquire the necessary prerequisites differ markedly regionally and historically. This is obvious when comparing family farming in West African countries (Zossou et al., 2020), Mexico's clan-based street trade (Pries, 1998), the informal economy in India (Ram et al., 2025), low-skilled labour in logistics (Hirsch-Kreinsen et al., 2019), the globalised gig economy (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2022), the early advanced civilisations of Mesopotamia (Kutscha, 2008), the employer-centred economy of Japan, and the industrial and post-industrial economies of Europe (Pilz & Alexander, 2016).

Yet despite the differences, work-related learning “has long been central to generating the occupational capacities that societies, communities, and workplaces need, contributing to individuals’ initial and ongoing occupational advancement and their sense of selves as working age adults” (Billett, 2022, p. 1). Therefore, in all these societies, not only are the ways of making a living different but also how people develop their competences and build their capacities for doing so. Throughout history and across different cultures, the ways individuals gain prerequisites and enhance their work capacity have been institutionalised in various forms, from informal competence acquisition in families or work contexts to formal education systems, for example, in an apprenticeship system or at universities. The details depend on the social context and institutional order of a society (Billett, 2022; McLean, 2022), but broadly speaking, the prerequisites for gainful activity can be systematised in a configuration with three elements (Kraus, 2009):

- Specialised – and to some extent bodily internalised – *technical knowledge and skills* necessary to produce goods or provide services. This requirement arises from the nature of the activity.
- *Transversal competences* required by the social setting and context of work and interacting with others. This requirement arises from the social setting of work.

These two elements shape how tasks are accomplished in a work context. A third element is required for their use, and this third element concerns individuals’

relationships with work as a gainful and sense-making activity, and part of their lives.

- Individuals' work orientation describes their relationship with work, their ability to work, the significance of work in shaping their biography and everyday life, and how they develop their capability for work. The structure of the economy, society, and related institutions is connected to these personal factors and shapes social norms. This requirement stems from the economic and social order.

The capacity for work develops across individuals' working lives in all three elements of the configuration, as displayed in the visualisation (see Figure 13.1).

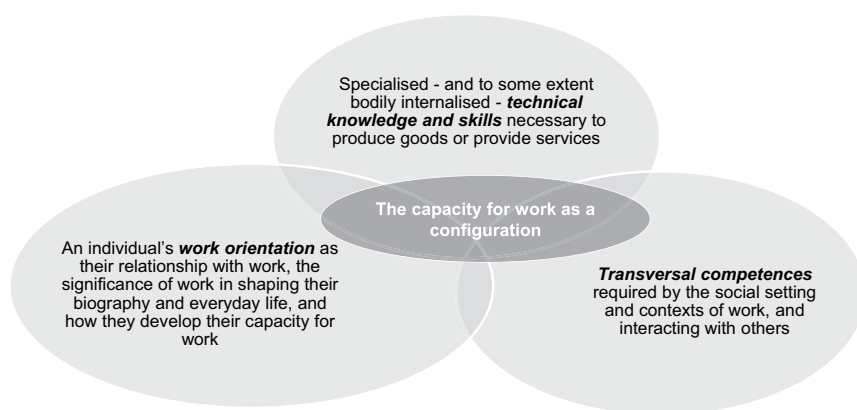


FIGURE 13.1 The capacity for work as a configuration

Work-Related Learning as an Iterative Process of Relating Work and Learning

In work-related learning, work and learning are linked, if not always seamless. Learning focuses on individuals' development processes, while work focuses on their performance in achieving goals in economic contexts of utilisation (e.g., workplaces). Therefore, both rely on each other yet struggle with each other in work-related learning, and the relationship between work and learning is not self-evident in this context either. Therefore, the specific relationship between work and learning serves as a starting point for developing a theoretical framework that systematically differentiates facets of work-related learning.

The connection between work and learning is not simply a given in work-related learning but is actively established by employees as learners. Thus, the linking of work and learning is something employees achieve and consistently perform throughout their working lives. This linkage can be realised on different scales along a continuum with two poles: situated moments of workplace learning and

participation in continuing education and training programmes. In the case of situated learning, learning is considered as “an integral aspect of activity” (Lave, 2010, p. 203) and is usually performed as a member of a specific community of practice. Learning is immersed in work practice, and employees realise a fusion between these related yet not seamless practices. In contrast, if work-related learning occurs through participation in initial or continuing education and training, the setting is typically organised by a professional in the field of pedagogy. Consequently, employees must manage transitions between their work and this pedagogical setting if they are effectively to relate and reconcile the two. These transitions involve both entering the setting and transferring what has been learnt in this context to the workplace. These two kinds of learning form a continuum from situated learning in the process of working, where learning is neither planned nor recognised by the individual learner and occur alongside working tasks, to learning in settings that are systematically planned on the basis of curricula offered by pedagogical institutions such as schools or training providers that issue official certificates to participants (Alheit & Dausien, 2002; Billett, 2023b; Kalenda & Boeren, 2025). Creating the relationship between work and learning is essential for work-related learning in the sense of acquiring and further developing knowledge and skills, transversal competences, and work orientation.

Similarly, the outcome of work-related learning can be viewed as a continuum between incorporated agency on one side, encompassing embodied routines, tacit and procedural knowledge, specific perceptual abilities, habitual behaviour, attitudes, and orienting values, and systematic knowledge and skills on the other (Kraus, 2022a). The settings and outcomes of work-related learning, understood as two continua with many intermediate forms between the poles, could be used as two dimensions to describe systematically work-related learning.

Based on this understanding, four modes of work-related learning can now be identified, each of which is systematically based on a specific relationship between learning and working and their respective outcomes (see Figure 13.2). In *implicit learning*, work and learning merge, with the focus on work activities and the dynamic learning opportunities they offer. It is mainly about developing embodied routines, tacit knowledge and attitudes through work activities as incorporated agency. In *explicit learning*, learning as an organised activity is paramount, featuring relevant content that is deliberately developed and presented for educational purposes. Here, the intentional acquisition of knowledge and skills for work activities is the aim. Experimental and reflective learning connect the two processes directly to each other (Dewey, 1997; Kolb, 2015): In *experimental learning*, employees are given impetus to change their working practices, to try them out systematically in their tasks and evaluate whether they were successful. The focus here is on expanding knowledge and skills. In *reflective learning*, individuals reflect – often in a context separate from their work environment – on their experiences, attitudes, and actions related to their current or past work activities. Through this process, they likely identify potential areas for improvement, which nurtures the development of incorporated agency.

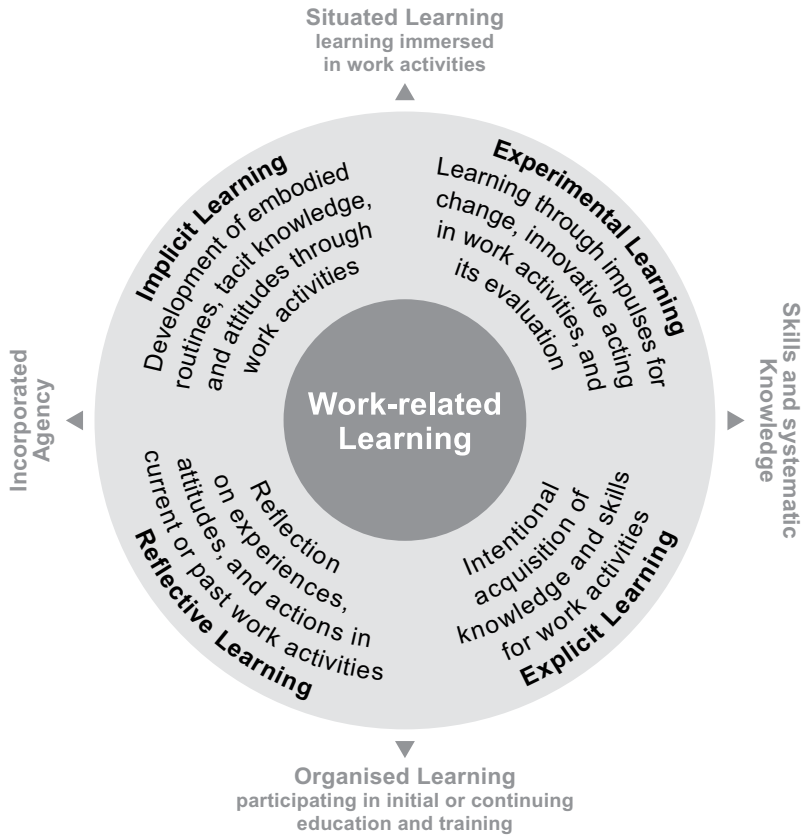


FIGURE 13.2 Analytical space for work-related learning: intersections of the “settings” continuum and the “outcomes” continuum

All four modes, implicit and explicit learning as well as reflective and experimental learning, are recurrently necessary for building and maintaining one’s work capacity throughout working life. These four modes are ideal types, and various practised forms of work-related learning can be located within this systematic framework depending on their proximity to the four modes. As each of these four modes of work-related learning is continually required for developing, confirming, maintaining, and updating one’s work capacity, the process of work-related learning is viewed as an iterative process in which all four modes constantly recur. Building the work capacity continues iteratively throughout an individual’s working life (Kraus, 2017a, 2017b, 2022a, 2022b).

Here, another critical aspect in the understanding of work-related learning as an iterative process could be emphasised. It is an ongoing developmental process that does not follow a set sequence or process (Billett et al., 2023). Maintaining

the capacity for work provides a fundamental orientation because it is part of work orientation. The specific content and goals are continuously redefined through a step-by-step development process, aligning with work requirements, the individual's vision of the future, their social environment, and the institutional framework (Kraus, 2017a, 2017b, 2022a, 2022b). When work-related learning is understood in this way, it becomes clear that learning at the workplace is as important as learning in the educational environment and that continuing education and training are as important as initial education and training. As demonstrated by research on activities such as hunting (Bjursell, 2025), painting (Hinchcliff, 2025), or avoiding collisions at sea (Bailey et al., 2023), learning to perform complex activities with virtuosity requires a great variety of different opportunities to learn over a long time. This includes, but is not limited to, observing others performing this activity, watching explanatory videos on the subject, completing formal qualifications, performing the activity with others, discussing experiences of performing this activity with like-minded people, attending further training courses, reading specialist journals, practising the activity alone or with others, being observed by others while performing the activity, and so on. When iterative learning processes are considered in this way, it becomes apparent that the iterations involved have both temporal and spatial dimensions. These are discussed in the following sections.

The Temporal Dimension of the Iterative Process of Work-Related Learning

The temporal dimension in this iterative process of work-related learning arises from the repeated alternation between different forms of work-related learning found in the analytical space for work-related learning (see Figure 13.2). Work-related learning processes are interwoven throughout individuals' working lives. These evolving processes are framed and directed by an individual's work orientation and also involve the requirements of work (and employers) as well as the socio-economic and social framework conditions of living (Kraus, 2009).

The relationship between education, learning, and work in work-related learning has a temporal dimension because all require time, and individual time is limited. Schematically, we can identify four models of how education, learning, and work can be temporally related (see Figure 13.3). It is important to remember that the purpose of these models is analytical, and that is to focus on principal options for how both processes might be relationally located on the temporal horizon of working life as ideal types. An integrated model of work-related learning as an iterative process is presented later, based on these four temporal relationships of learning and work.

In the first three ideal-type models, an initial learning phase of work-related education is set in the early life course stage, which can vary in length. That is the prototype of learning for work in initial vocational education and training. In the *sequential model*, work-related learning and work are organised in blocks one after the other, and the initial phase of work-related education is followed

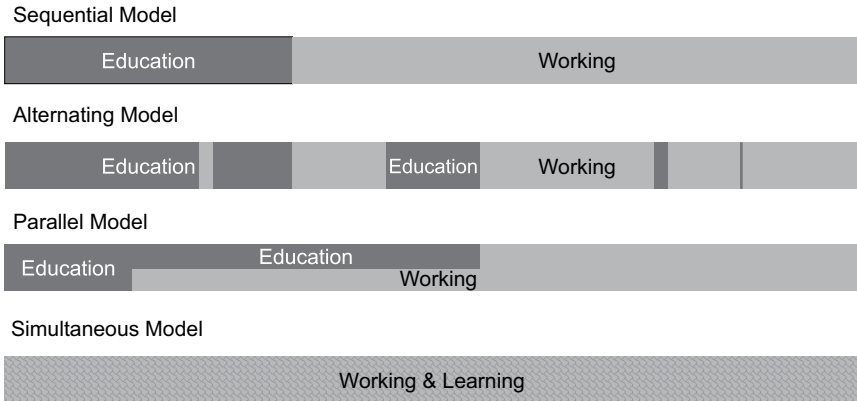


FIGURE 13.3 Analytical models of the temporal relations of work and learning in work-related learning (ideal types)

by work. In the *alternating model*, the initial phase of work-related education is also followed by work. However, participating in work-related education and training does not cease completely when work begins, and there are shorter periods of continuing vocational education and training afterwards. In the *parallel model*, the initial phase of initial work-related education and training is followed by a phase in which work and learning run parallel; that is, although they occur during the same period of life, they are organised in their external form as two more or less independent and parallel areas of life. This aspect differs in the last model, where work-related learning and work not only occur during the same life period but are also organised into one overarching process, allowing them to happen simultaneously. The *simultaneous model* emphasises learning while working, and the parallel model illustrates how the two operate side by side. All four relational temporal positionings of work and learning are integrated in the last model, the *integrated model*. It illustrates how the temporal relationship between learning and work is presented when work-related learning is understood as an iterative process throughout one's working life. There are periods of work-related education, alternatively full-time or parallel to working, and phases of working in which the focus is on learning simultaneously in the work process (see Figure 13.4).



FIGURE 13.4 Integrated model of work-related learning as an iterative process

The Spatial Dimension in the Iterative Process of Work-Related Learning

The spatial dimension of iterative learning arises from the way work-related learning takes place, alternating between work and learning, and being located differently. According to social space theory (e.g., Massey, 2007; Soja, 1989), spaces are not created by building, but they come into being when people make a (built) place their own. When people appropriate a place, they replicate the symbolically and materially imprinted order of the place but also add their individual and social interpretations based on their experiences and aspirations. Therefore, space is a relationship and a social phenomenon constructed by individuals in social contexts (Bourdieu, 2002; Lefebvre, 2013).

The spatial dimension of iteration is based on the notion that learning spaces are social spaces regardless of where they occur. They represent a specific type of social space that emerges when a place – be it a learning site, a workplace, or any other location – is appropriated in a learning process. In this process, individuals actively engage with the learning opportunities deposited in this place as both a material and social environment (Kraus, 2015). Learning spaces have three key characteristics: relationships with other people, design of the environment, and symbolic and cultural significance (Kraus, 2015). Learning spaces can be found in various environments, ranging from the everyday to those explicitly designed for educational purposes (Brooks et al., 2012; Kraus, 2016). In pedagogical settings such as schools and continuing education centres, educators use their professional skills to design the place according to pedagogical criteria. Nevertheless, a space of learning only emerges when people make this place their own and appropriate it for the purpose of learning. As an iterative process, work-related learning can take place at all these locations, and regardless of where it is located, it is content-wise related to work. People enter different places for different purposes and can make them into spaces of work-related learning if the constellation allows them (and encourages them) to do so (Kraus, 2015). Concerning the iterative process of work-related learning, this perspective emphasises, firstly, that workplaces are potentially spaces of learning if they allow and encourage learning and people appropriate them for learning (Brooks et al., 2012). Secondly, it emphasises the importance of pedagogical frameworks that enable work-related learning by allowing people to focus on learning processes for a specified period. The iterative process of work-related learning is therefore shaped not only by the temporal relationship between work and learning throughout working life but also by the specific potential of different locations and spaces of work-related learning at the workplace, in classrooms, and beyond.

Relating Learning and Work in the Iterative Process of Work-Related Learning – An Underestimated Requirement for Employees

Relationships between learning and work are embedded in the temporal and spatial dimensions of the iterative process of work-related learning. Temporally, they

occur as recurring and interdependent moments during an individual's working life, and spatially, at the points where different spaces of work-related learning intertwine, overlap, or are bridged by the individual. Establishing a relationship between education, learning, and work is an indispensable part of the iterative process of work-related learning.

The establishment of a relationship is crucial for work-related learning, since both follow distinct modes. Work as a gainful activity takes place in the mode of performance and is usually carried out in conditions of scarcity. There are time pressures and demands to achieve goals and to fulfil orders. Learning and education, on the other hand, are about adopting new ideas and developing. They are partly structured by external conditions such as time frames, curricula, or pedagogical settings, but they remain the achievement of the individual, dependent on their ambition, learning history, and situation (Alheit & Dausien, 2002; Billett, 2023b). Given that work, education, and learning each have their own temporal orders and often operate independently, individuals must navigate and balance them within the context of work-related learning.

There is also a spatial dimension in the relationship between working and learning. Hence, there are different elements in the iterative process of work-related learning, each linked predominantly to a different setting with its specific material and social potential for learning, whether it is a workplace, a learning site, or elsewhere. Implicit learning, characterised by the development of bodily incorporated routines, knowledge, and attitudes through work activities, typically occurs in the workplace (Marsick & Watkins, 1990), through providing opportunities for practice and rehearsal (Fuller & Unwin, 2003). The same applies to experimental learning, which involves learning through innovative acting in the working practice and its evaluation (Illeris, 2011). This process can occur regardless of whether the change in work practices stems from independent problem-solving or a transfer from an educational programme. Learning sites and pedagogical settings are again predestined for reflective learning through thinking about experiences and attitudes, and explicit learning as the intentional acquisition of knowledge and skills (Faller et al., 2020) (see Figure 13.2). Mixed forms of work-related learning strategies, such as reflective and experimental learning, which both extend beyond implicit and explicit learning, are particularly valuable because they create both a hybrid space with micro-sequential alternation linking the modes of work and learning, regardless of where learning occurs.

If work-related education that has been institutionalised, such as for higher education, an apprenticeship, or a continuing education programme – i.e. a form of work-related learning near the pole of organised learning in the continuum (see Figure 13.2) – the beginning and end are framed with markers such as final examinations and entry requirements or course fees, and rituals that endow them with material symbols, such as graduation certificates or doctoral hats. Despite the institutional character, there is a situational dimension of a transition here created by the individuals and their practice and experience. “If we assume that transitions are not a given quasi-natural social fact (unlike the process of physical growth or maturation, which is viewed as natural), then transitions must instead be understood

as being constantly (re-)produced” (Walther et al., 2022, p. 7). This perspective highlights both the active individual making transitions between work and institutionalised learning settings and their embeddedness in social, institutional, and discursive circumstances. It is this embeddedness that initiates and supports the individual activities, hindering or enabling individuals to make transitions to organised pedagogical settings during the iterative process of work-related learning. Furthermore, this embeddedness highlights the capacity to initiate, organise, negotiate, navigate, or avoid transitions between work and learning as a central aspect of work-related learning. That goes beyond the immediate demands of work and characterises a work-related biographical capacity to shape one’s life, for example, biographical agency. This factor adds another critical dimension to the iterative process of work-related learning. It is not only about learning processes directly related to work but also about biography and the ability to shape one’s own life within given socio-structural conditions (Alheit & Dausien, 2002) and to develop biographical agency. Taken further politically, it is also about the capacity to influence these conditions and the demands placed on individuals within them.

As outlined at the beginning of this chapter, there is ambivalence in describing biographical agency as a capacity to connect work and learning. In a context of socio-economic change, it places the responsibility for resolving associated structural problems on the individual and their ability to develop appropriate competences. Nevertheless, it makes sense to recognise the competence aspect in this context and thus to develop targeted educational support measures that can assist individuals to initiate, organise, negotiate, navigate, or avoid transitions, relate work and learning, and maintain agency during times of change.

Relating Work and Learning in Work-Related Learning – Four Examples

Work-related learning constantly involves relating work and learning, which has both temporal and spatial dimensions, as suggested earlier. The challenge of building this relationship through actively involving employees in work-related learning is illustrated below using the examples of developing one’s own work biography, shaping everyday life, participating in further training, and learning at the workplace.

- (1) An individual’s *working life* is shaped by gainful activity and learning pathways which can be characterised in two ways:
 - o the *life course* – an institutionalised and documentable sequence of the various stages between (work-related) education and gainful employment as a curriculum vitae
 - o the *biography* – a narrative of a person’s life to date, including (work-related) education and learning, employment, experiences outside of work, the person’s self-image, and expectations for the future.

The ability to develop life course and biography is, along with the ability to undertake activities of work-related learning, a higher-level objective of work-related learning. It includes the capacity to make (or decide not to make) transitions such as taking up a course of study or an internship, changing jobs, or completing further training, or traveling abroad, or being able to handle issues about meaning and value in life. It also requires being able to make decisions about the allocation of time, for example, the duration of an internship, or places of work and the time commitment they require. Required transitions also differ during the phases of employment, such as finding, staying in, or changing jobs. The various ways of establishing a relationship between work and learning are superficially documented in a curriculum vitae and can be understood through a biography narrative.

- (2) *Daily life* and routine arrangements play a significant role in work-related learning due to their temporal and spatial dimensions in the iterative process of work-related learning throughout a working life. This is not just about the everyday logistical problems of routes from one place to another but also the meaning- and value-related issues of using time and allocating time in different spaces that are related to different spheres of life. Transitions in daily life occur within diverse social contexts and constellations; they must be coordinated with other people who are also constantly undergoing transitions. A meaningful and practical transition management is crucial for a satisfying everyday life. The challenges and difficulties of permanent transition between the different areas of daily life should not be underestimated just because they are part of everyone's daily lives. Transitions between work and formalised settings of learning fit into this picture of managing transitions in daily life.
- (3) The transitional character of work-related education is also evident in *participation in continuing education* (Kraus et al., forthcoming). As employees, adults are expected and encouraged to use their skills, take responsibility for themselves, and, in the best-case scenario, educate young people in their occupation. In continuing education, the competences being taught are under construction, the professional knowledge required for making informed decisions is continually being revised or expanded, and the participants must engage with the unfinished and uncertain nature of educational and learning situations. Making transitions between work and education that involve managing your expectations and revising your self-image is another challenge of participating in vocational or professional continuing education. When participating in further education, transitions between the status of participant and employee can be understood as a requirement for identity management. The transitions necessary for participation in continuing education are temporal and spatial, and marked by the beginning and end of a continuing education course or attendance at a lesson at a specific place of learning.
- (4) If work-related learning is *workplace learning*, the relationship between work and learning becomes even more fluid in terms of their spatial and temporal

dimensions, because there is no specific place or time reserved for learning. In this type of work-related learning, employees remain in their workplace, but the space that they create in terms of their perception of the situation and how they act in that place changes. There is no physical transition, and being able to accomplish the transition depends only on one's ability to create different spaces in the same place. When the learning process begins, a so-called third space emerges in the workplace that is not the exclusive preserve of working or learning. In this hybrid space, work and learning merge, despite their differences in nature. The third space of workplace learning occurs between the rationality of work and learning and requires constant rebalancing. This is a demanding – and often underestimated – task for employees, which has become increasingly important in times of change. There is no “safe space” for learning, and ideally the working process should be conducted in ways that allow for the evolution of learning.

Conclusions – The Iterative Processes of Work-Related Learning

The four examples in the previous section demonstrate how demanding and complex work-related learning is. It evolves at the intersection of two continua: the spectrum of different forms of work-related learning, spanning from situated learning to organised learning, and the content-related continuum involving agency performing the complex process of work as well as systematic knowledge and skills across various forms. They constitute an iterative process that takes place throughout a person's working life, involving the alternating of all four modes of work-related learning (explicit, implicit, experimental, reflective). Today, employees are expected to be able to create a personal curriculum vitae and a sense-making biographical narrative, manage work and learning within a fulfilling and manageable daily life, transition into institutionalised forms of learning, and integrate these into the work process. They must also balance learning and work by developing workplace environments that permit a blend of both logics. All of this is a demanding and often underestimated requirement for contemporary employment. It is an essential task for research to make the requirements that individuals face during such iterative processes of work-related learning visible. On this basis, political and pedagogical approaches can be developed to support employees to manage these requirements.

It is also crucial therefore to conduct further theoretical and empirical research into understanding the relationships between work and learning within the context of iterative work-related learning processes. This is particularly important given the ambivalence surrounding current change processes. These should not be seen as the sole responsibility of individuals, and their successful management is not merely the outcome of learning processes. Instead, it is deeply embedded in social power dynamics and inequalities. Nevertheless, it is essential to support individuals during times of change as they balance work and learning, develop iterative work-related learning processes that complement their work life, and enable them to make a living in a meaningful way while establishing a satisfying personal life.

Note

- 1 To this end, it draws on various works by the author on this topic, which have thus far only been published in German, and attempts to bring them together comprehensively in this chapter.

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PART IV

Empirical Insights



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14

LEARNING FROM RHYTHMS

Navigating Personal Life Transitions at the Intersection of Work and Sustainability

Elisa Thevenot

Experience of Overlapping and Fluctuating Temporalities

Climate change was once thought to be a long way off. Despite constant concerns and warnings from scientists that severe and radical changes are already taking place, we still struggle to fully grasp the potential magnitude of environmental disruption (Mitchell, 2009). The urgency of environmental issues fluctuates in public consciousness, often spiking following major natural disasters, particularly when accompanied by extensive media coverage. At other times, environmental concerns are overshadowed, as seen during the Covid-19 pandemic, or amid geopolitical tensions. When such events overlap, environmental issues tend to be sidelined in public and political debates.

This example highlights the inconsistencies in our relationship with time: short-term objectives often over-shadow long-term risks like climate change, creating a contradiction between immediate goals and future challenges, the long-term nature of climate change clashing with the short-term focus of political decisions (Levin et al., 2012), even as the former shifts from a distant threat to an immediate concern (Weart, 2003). This shift is reflected, for instance, in the growing academic literature on eco-anxiety – an emotional response, even chronic fear related to climate change and ecological degradation – which indicates how the personal experience of climate change can alter (Brophy et al., 2023). It also raises questions about how educational sciences ought to respond (e.g., Jukes et al., 2024). This temporal shift highlights a need for adult education to address how individuals engage with and respond to environmental issues that feel increasingly relevant. The growing collective and individual engagement with these challenges, reflected in sustainability discourse (e.g., UNESCO's SDGs) and the push for an ecological transition, is also reflected in shifting attitudes to work and career, as explored below.

Sustainability, increasingly framed as a guiding principle for social and environmental change (Neckel, 2017), calls for individuals to realign their life priorities, though there is no consensus on the goals and visions associated with it (Adloff & Neckel, 2019). The ambiguous urgency surrounding sustainability-related issues has created significant dissonance in everyday life, especially as many societal structures continue to follow outdated temporal logics (Latour, 2012; Sharma, 2014). For instance, individuals concerned about the planet's future may question traditional life goals like career planning and long-term financial security. Labour market trends, such as the Great Resignation and Quiet Quitting, reflect shifts in employee attitudes to work and workplace culture, highlighting their doubts about the sustainability of current systems (d'Aniello, 2022; Liang et al., 2023).

Individuals can find themselves caught between conflicting demands: the need to change unsustainable practices and become environmental change agents and the pressure to meet traditional institutional expectations, such as entering the job market and pursuing financial stability (Thevenot & Hof, 2024). This discrepancy creates a challenging balancing act, especially in a singularised society (Reckwitz, 2020), where there "is a looming expectation that everyone must become an entrepreneur of time control within highly differential relationships to time" (Sharma, 2014, p. 138). These tensions point to the need to examine educational discourse about what should be learned in this context.

Lifelong learning discussions have long addressed the challenges posed by rapid social change (Hof, 2022, p. 19, p. 37). Despite disagreement over whether to empower individuals to make autonomous life choices (e.g., Bélanger, 2015, pp. 233ff) or to emphasise the responsibility of policymakers and organisations for shaping long-term societal developments, there is consensus that social change is accelerating. This speeding up has significant consequences for individuals, including feelings of alienation (Rosa, 2010), such as alienation from work (Rosa et al., 2018). For Salling Olesen (2023), who is interested in learning across working lives, "a consequence of this acceleration [is] that the learning pattern of a normal biography, in which most learning is expected to take place in childhood and youth and last for the rest of life is generally crumbling" (p.117). It is as if individual life cycles are increasingly out of synch with the pace of social change. This disruption prompts questioning of long-standing assumptions about standards of education and the timing at which they should be realised.

If education must be reimaged, and one of the social observations is that our relationship with time and temporalities is dysfunctional, then we must discuss our experience of time, and the learning processes associated with it. This means moving beyond abstract theorising to seek practical ways to realign learning with expectations for adult learning. As Salling Olesen (2023) argues, "[i]f lifelong learning policies [are to] succeed, they must first mobilise the flexibility and creativity of individual workers, who develop competences by negotiating practices under the imperative of change" (p.119). Hence, we can understand learning by examining the lived experiences of working people who navigate sometimes complementary,

sometimes contradictory or disharmonious temporalities in their personal and professional lives (Alhadeff-Jones, 2019; Pineau, 2000).

This chapter makes an empirical analysis and interpretation of subjective experiences of the (rapidly) changing relationships to environmental issues and sustainability challenges in the context of work, and how these shape meaning and learning processes for working adults. The analysis focuses on the temporal configurations at the nexus of work and sustainability and examines how these constitute learning experiences relevant to the current context. Based on biographical work-life narratives featured in the project *Working out sustainability in Transitions*, work-life narrative interviews were conducted with individuals who were considering reorienting their professional activities in line with their understanding of the ecological transition. The investigation identified different approaches to change in times of transition, shaped by varying understandings of sustainability. So far, the temporal dimension of these phenomena has not been thoroughly addressed in existing literature. This chapter aims to help fill this gap.

Given the increasing acknowledgement in the social sciences of the multiplicity of temporalities (Alhadeff-Jones, 2017, p. 133; Sharma, 2014, 2019) and the corresponding complexity, another innovative aspect of this chapter is that it uses rhythms as a theoretical lens to explore how temporalities coexist, intersect, and shape social life. Rhythms, including institutional, work, and family routines, help us to understand time's complexity and its implications for social action. As Blue (2019) notes, rhythms prepare "the ground for deeper analysis of the ways in which practices affect each other" (p. 939). Rhythms emphasise process, dynamic relationships, and fluidity, linking change and formative learning experiences. Alhadeff-Jones (2019) argues that rhythms "eventually influence the processes through which adults may develop their autonomy and sustain their agency" (p.168). For instance, through rhythms we can identify, understand, and thus manage the patterns, periodicity, and discontinuities that shape our biographical trajectories. The concept of "rhythmic intelligence" introduced by Alhadeff-Jones (2023) "qualifies the capacity developed to deal with the rhythmicity of educational processes" (p.23).

Focusing on rhythms, this chapter aims to conciliate long-range fields that are the world of work, sustainability issues, and the life course and which are closely interwoven in the fabric of some life course narratives. The second part of the chapter analyses biographical work-life narratives from a rhythms perspective, presenting three contrasting cases to explore how work and sustainability rhythms can intersect, the type of meaning that is being produced, and the associated learning processes comprising: i) *learning from colliding rhythms*, ii) *learning from keeping control over rhythms*, and iii) *learning from zigzagging rhythms*. We advance the idea that understanding the temporal configurations of working life in sustainability transitions offers a meaningful approach for navigating contemporary challenges in adult education.

Rhythms at the crossroad of sustainability and work trajectories

Once acknowledged, the temporal is discernible everywhere.

(Sharma, 2014, p. 138)

Rhythmanalysis was first proposed by Henri Lefebvre (1992/2004) as a method for understanding the significance of daily rhythms of everyday life (e.g., biological rhythms, family routines, school timetables, workflows, institutional calendars, seasonal variations) and their unfolding through space and time. Lefebvre initially sought to revise contemporary understandings of space and time by viewing them as inextricably intertwined rather than separate phenomena. He saw rhythms as a practical lens through which to investigate this complexity. Like knots, he seems to suggest, they can be untangled to clarify and produce new knowledge: “Everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is a rhythm” (1992/2004, p. 15). Thus, more than a concept, he viewed rhythms as the object of a new field of knowledge with practical consequences (Lefebvre, 1992/2004, p. 3; Alhadeff-Jones, 2019, p. 170). Indeed, rhythms highlight the socially constructed nature of time and space, particularly in terms of their relational and historical production, thus serving to analyse “social constellations, power relations, and conflicts relevant in each situation” (Schmid, 2008, p. 29, as cited in Alhadeff-Jones, 2019, p. 168).

One of the aims of this chapter is to reexamine the experiences of adult workers at the nexus of work and sustainability issues, viewed from a social change imperative.

“Work” as a configuration of rhythms structuring our lives

Work conceptualised as a configuration of rhythms structures individual lives and society. Often regarded as the primary pacemaker (*Zeitgeber*) of adulthood and recognisable through its distinct rhythms (Wanka, 2020), work is traditionally distinguished from private time, adhering to structured schedules (e.g., 9-to-5, weekdays) and designated spaces (e.g., company buildings, offices). People build routines around their work and, now more than ever, are expected to maintain them, including for instance healthy work-life balances (Reckwitz, 2020). Upon closer examination, some of these rhythms prove incompatible, leading individuals constantly to violate temporal norms, making “normal time” often feel “oppressive” (Sharma, 2014, p. 140) or “alienating” (Rosa, 2010). One of Sharma’s conclusions, in her study of persistent structural inequalities associated with the “normalising temporal order” of work, is that “[c]apital invests in certain temporalities – that is, capital caters to the clock that meters the life and lifestyle of some of its workers and consumers. The others are left to recalibrate themselves to serve a dominant temporality” (Sharma, 2014, pp. 139–140). In this sense, work makes sense as a socio-cultural rhythm, and yet its boundaries

are constantly being questioned, adapted, and redefined. The powerful wave that was the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, disrupted some taken-for-granted rhythms, “rhythmic unconscious” (Alhadeff-Jones, 2020, 2021) and seems to have permanently disrupted some of our relations to work. The initial assumption of this research project is that the ecological transition is also a disruption to work rhythms, though less visible, slower, less predictable, ongoing, somehow never-ending, and therefore harder to pin down and describe than the effects of the pandemic. Breaking down the various rhythms that shape our understanding of work helps us to identify continuities and discontinuities, and thus how our perception of work is evolving.

Sustainability as a configuration of wicked rhythms spanning lifetimes

The large-scale ecological transition inherent in the notion of environmental sustainability is future-oriented, drawing on imaginaries of the future to shape present actions (Adloff & Neckel, 2019). However, its direct connection to issues such as climate change makes the future on which sustainability and ecological transition rely difficult to plan, as it is marked by considerable uncertainty. For instance, the pace of environmental degradation remains unpredictable, and thus the speed of necessary yet unclear adaptations and the ultimate goals remain uncertain and disputed (Adloff & Neckel, 2019). This “super wicked” context (Levin et al., 2012) leads to different ideas about how quickly society should change to meet frequently contradictory sustainability goals. Consequently, for individuals, the pace of personal changes implied in sustainability discourses varies significantly, depending on personal understandings of what sustainability entails (Thevenot & Hof, 2024; Thevenot, 2025).

The pace of change feels different depending on individual engagements. One person may experience the notion of ecological transition as fast and purposeful when surrounded by like-minded individuals in collective action, such as climate strikes, thus sharing a sense of urgency with others. In other situations, individuals may perceive no socio-ecological change occurring at all, particularly when making choices that diverge from the norm – such as adopting a vegetarian diet or forgoing car ownership. In such cases, the pace of transition may feel slow, even futile. Thus, living within the ecological transition context is not only about time, it is also tied to spaces and activities that feel like moves toward a desired future. With the mainstreaming of sustainability, ecological transition activities, spaces, and times have accelerated, even though their socio-cultural intelligibility remains “super wicked” (Levin et al., 2012).

Labour market policymakers who grapple with pressing questions about whether the ecological transition will create or destroy jobs are already looking into the dynamics at the intersection of work and sustainability. The process is fraught with challenges, and key issues related to a just transition remain

unresolved (Littig, 2018). For example, “green work” does not automatically mean “decent work”, and many approaches prioritise the economisation and monetisation of nature rather than social and environmental well-being. Given the persistent and evolving nature of sustainability concerns, it is crucial for educators to explore how individuals navigate this pervasive, often dissatisfying (Pleyers, 2016, p. 8), unpredictable, and fluctuating context shaped by sustainability issues.

We conclude this discussion of rhythmanalysis with a quote from Alhadeff-Jones (2023), who underscores the complexity of learning processes, emphasising their idiosyncratic and dynamic nature:

[T]hroughout their existence, people learn to adjust, coordinate, and give meaning to feelings, thoughts, actions and environments that keep fluctuating. Such a movement is constitutive of who they are, as much as it defines how they evolve and what they become, personally and professionally. It makes it necessary, especially for adults, to learn how to combine and balance the complementary, contradictory, and antagonistic temporalities that compose their daily activities and their own history.

(Alhadeff-Jones, 2023, p. 13)

Methodological Issues

The work-life narratives analysed here were originally collected for a qualitative reconstructive research project *Working out Sustainability in Transitions*, with the aim of better understanding how people are “doing transitions” (Walther et al., 2022), in the context of sustainability through work. Transitions represent a potentially fruitful heuristic approach (Walther et al., 2022) to shed light on processes of learning and meaning making (Hof & Bernhard, 2025). Grounding the observation of learning processes in the analysis of biographical narration allows researchers to capture both moments of rupture and continuity in work trajectories. Patterns emerge in how orientations of knowledge and action are reproduced or modified over time, thereby revealing the temporal and transformative dynamics of learning along work trajectories. The 15 participants in the study were recruited on the basis of having gone through a career change in the context of the ecological transition. For the purpose of this chapter, the narratives were re-examined, focusing on identifiable temporalities and rhythms. The analytical method consisted in identifying passages describing discontinuity and then interpreting and verbalising the implicit knowledge that guides the knowledge and action orientation used in the narratives. The ongoing comparison between the interviews allows for the identification of patterns and contrasts leading to the elaboration of a typology (Nohl, 2017).

Empirical Analysis and Interpretations

Time in itself cannot be observed. It can however be felt, conceived and lived through the experience of changes and the rhythms they involve.

(Alhadeff-Jones, 2019, p. 177)

To elucidate the theoretical conceptualisations, this chapter draws on empirical insights from the research project *Working out Sustainability in Transitions*. Comprehensive analysis of the collected data identified three distinct rhythmic configurations: i) *learning from colliding rhythms*, ii) *learning from keeping control over rhythms*, and iii) *learning from zigzagging rhythms*. These configurations represent the different ways in which rhythms are experienced and how we learn from them. However, they are not exclusive or definitive descriptions of individual learning experiences but rather examples of identified patterns that can inform our understanding of learning experiences and challenges in this specific context.

As such, the three anonymised work-life narratives discussed in the following section are not only as examples of learning arrangements that shed light on typical rhythmic combinations but also as reminders of idiosyncratic learning processes, given that the research design follows a biographical approach. These processes are shaped by past events and personal circumstances. Additionally, the unique narratives highlight the need to contextualise events and experiences, as well as to consider the situated nature of what is said and how it is said during the interviews. Finally, it is essential to acknowledge that the heterogeneous nature of rhythm processes (e.g., biological, epidemiological, group dynamics) makes it difficult to establish empirical and rational relationships (Alhadeff-Jones, 2023, p. 20). The participants themselves did not employ the concept of rhythm; it remains a metaphor for describing phenomena in a way that facilitates further discussion about the specific processes of learning occurring in this context.

Learning From Colliding Rhythms –Nico’s Work-Life Narratives

Nico’s portrait

Nico participated in this research through two biographical narrative interviews (T1: August 2020, T2: September 2021). Analysing his interviews alongside others using reconstructive biographical analysis, cross-case comparisons, and reflective interpretation (methods described above) helped identify the process pattern *learning from colliding rhythms*.

Nico was born in France in the late 1980s. He struggled in school until an 11th-grade course on industrial design sparked his interest. He pursued vocational training in aeroplane design and secured his dream internship in 2012, and eventually he found employment in that field. He believes his personal relationship with

work and employment has been partly shaped by his father's relationship with his employment as a construction worker, which ended in a work accident that left him in a wheelchair. Nico claims that this event *certainly influenced* his questions about work, making money, and how it should be combined with enjoying life. But he stayed with his company for six years, despite it no longer being his dream job. He describes his colleagues and his tasks as unproblematic; his personal challenge at work rather appears to have been a cognitive dissonance on a larger scale: he strongly opposes liberal capitalism and his employer's role in reproducing social inequality and environmental harm. Though abstract to some, these concerns left him deeply alienated – especially since this company and the aviation industry had long been his goal and remain his passion.

Nico recounts the beginning of a new personal interest in environmental issues and the design of a professional project as having arisen during a hot summer under a poorly insulated roof. Determined to pursue green building, he discovered training opportunities – especially in straw-bale construction – at a climate festival. When his manager refused his request for a one-year training leave, he resigned and joined a government-funded programme.¹ By summer 2020 (T1), the training was complete, but he had no concrete plans. A year later (T2), he had moved to a new city, separated from his girlfriend, and joined a small group of self-employed eco-builders. In (T2) he describes being fulfilled, enjoying a work-hobby balance that aligns with his long-desired lifestyle.

When rhythms collide

Nico had become dissatisfied with his former firm because it was just another business, driven by the profit motive above all else. So, “the moment HR validated [his] contractual termination”, he had a feeling of great liberation: “I really needed to regain this freedom in decision making, because when you're on a permanent contract you actually get five weeks a year off, the rest of the time is work”. For six years, objectively speaking, Nico did have time, have a life, outside of work – during weekends, evenings, vacations – but felt he was not “totally free”. His employer remained the main *Zeitgeber* in his life, always on his mind. The company's practices clashed with his beliefs, and he felt they were oppressive. His strong principles were incompatible with his job, to the point that he saw no option but to end his contract. Nico does not blame any particular person or situation within the company; rather, what he found oppressive was being part of a system that had a hold on him and was somehow unstoppable.

Unlike the proponents of a certain work–life balance discourse, who emphasise the management and separation of professional and private lives, Nico experienced his job imposed a “*métro-boulot-dodo*” (subway-work-sleep) rhythm, leaving no room for alternative rhythms. His work rhythm dominated all, and only by cutting ties completely could he begin to establish other rhythms in his life.

This incompatibility between work and other aspects of life is also evident in another participant's narrative: "I absolutely had to leave banking because it was no longer possible. It was no longer possible" (Gabriel). His use of "absolutely" underscores that he saw no other option but to disengage completely from banking, which had too much control over his life.

Nico and Gabriel indicate that they were subjected to a professional rhythm that prevented them from living up to their aspirations and engaging in new ideas and projects. Their strong desire to align with what they saw as a fast-moving ecological transition led them to question the rationality of their professional rhythm. Instead of ignoring incompatibilities, they accepted that clashing rhythms bring unintended, undesirable effects. Yet through recognising this collision, they regained freedom, agency, and the ability to reset and rearrange their rhythms in ways that felt right to them.

The learning process described in these narratives involves recognising and making sense of colliding life rhythms. It means reflecting on incompatibilities, reinterpreting disruptive changes, reassessing gains and losses, and creating space for rhythmic (re)arrangement. Breaking from one's professional group is described as a solution to adopting alternative rhythms once seen as inaccessible. Gabriel followed others into the degrowth and voluntary simplicity movements, reducing consumption, while Nico's urgency is shaped by a specific broader narrative. He referred to France's former green politician, Nicolas Hulot, who stated that there must be "a war effort if we are to limit global warming. And a war effort means a major upheaval in people's habits and comforts". For Nico, this is not a narrative about individual trajectory and atypical professional transitions; rather, he underlines the big picture, the social and political factors that accompany, justify, and validate the urgency of his personal transition. His narrative feeds on and into a larger story about how society's transition to sustainability is, for some, a state of emergency. By connecting his story to this one, he frames his professional change as part of a larger, urgent movement, rather than an isolated decision, and aligns it with the epoch and cadence set by other legitimate sources.

Learning From Keeping Control Over Rhythms – Sophie's Work-Life Narratives

Sophie's portrait

Sophie, like Nico, participated in my research through two biographical narrative interviews (T1: September 2020, T2: January 2022). Analysing her interviews alongside others helped identify the learning process of *keeping rhythms under control*.

Sophie, born in France in the early 1980s, describes herself as having a strong entrepreneurial spirit. After a brief sales career, she began training in home care services. During her three-year training, she married her longtime boyfriend and had two children. At 26, she launched her first home care agency, which grew

steadily, and after 11 years, she now employs 80 people. Her personal life, however, has been difficult. After her first marriage ended, she became pregnant to a new partner who became violent. Ashamed of what her social circle might say if she left this second partner, she endured three years in a violent relationship, during which her health severely declined. After extensive psychological counselling, she found new meaning in life – the turning point marked by her discovery that she has a high IQ. This revelation brought immense relief, relieving long-held doubts about herself. Since then, she has been driven by a thirst for self-development therapies and has completed multiple certificates to become a therapist herself, in sophrology, clown theatre, laughter yoga, non-violent communication, psychotherapy, and dance therapy, among others. In her first interview (T1), Sophie expressed her interest in setting up an alternative community. She has completed training in shared governance, but with three children, it was not the right time to start such a project. By (T2), a year later, other plans had taken shape – she was launching a forest school and preparing to welcome its first pupils next term in September.

When rhythms are kept under control

In both narratives, Sophie portrays herself as a distinctive individual, defined by her ability to generate ideas and turn them into concrete achievements. She also expresses a deep-seated belief in being “at the service of life and the world”. Her repeated use of “always” underscores a quest for continuity in her identity and direction. Ecological values, for example, she described as something that came naturally to her rather than as colliding with her life course at some point in time:

I’ve been a vegetarian since I was 14. [. . .] Initially it wasn’t at all ecological (*laughs*); it was really ideological, my support for life. And then finally, bit by bit, documenting myself, at 14 I was young, we didn’t talk about all these things like we do today. Gradually, I began to thank myself not only because I wasn’t taking life away to feed myself. [. . .] I began to realise the impact that animal production had on nature.

The words “bit by bit” and “gradually” give the impression of a logical falling into place of her ecological practices, as though they were an inherent aspect of her identity. It also made sense for Sophie, the CEO, to try to talk employees into sustainability practices at her care services company. But this failed. Sophie stated that her employees “only come to work for the salary at the end of the month and that’s it”. For practices to change, she believes, the impulse must come “from other employees”, not from the boss, so for now “it doesn’t work”. Sophie’s conclusion is that she tends to want change faster than others. This orientation becomes evident particularly in her subsequent reflections:

In my projects, it's true that I feel out of step. [. . .] I'm making progress, but [. . .] people aren't necessarily going to identify with what I'm going through, and at the same time, it seems so right to me every time considering what we experience in the world, and in terms of the vision of the world I'd like to have.

Sophie suggests that individuals often find it difficult to maintain pace with her ambitious vision for change, so she has learnt to avoid actions that could lead to significant and unmanageable conflicts within her company. Rather than acquiesce and dismiss her vision, Sophie has redirected her career to gain more autonomy and bring her ideas to life. By T2, her primary focus was the creation of an alternative forest school. She described a sense of good timing moving forward:

A friend of mine was home-schooling, the way I do with my daughter, and then, finally, we said to ourselves: "Ah, what if we started a school?" And that made complete sense with my values and beliefs. [. . .] So I got carried away very quickly, because I was extra-motivated, extra-stimulated (*laughs*) and we set up an association. In the beginning, there were five of us in the association, and I lost some people, because it's like any other project, I know that when I get carried away, it's because I know that this is it, it's right, it's the right time for me.

Although the first part of her description gives the impression of spontaneity – "what if we started a school?" – as well as a sense of impromptu enthusiasm – "I got carried away very quickly" – when she says "I know that this is it", Sophie instead implies that she has been preparing for such an idea or opportunity to come her way. Unlike the disruptive shifts and with it much uncertainty about the next steps as seen in Nico or Gabriel's stories, Sophie's narrative reflects her efforts to align rhythms – short- and long-term, personal and collective. In her first interview, she stated that she had "done a lot of work" on herself and possessed "a bunch of tools that [she] want[s] to pass on to say that it's possible to do things differently". When the idea emerged, Sophie already had a strong sense of her identity and aspirations: "It made complete sense with my values and beliefs". Recognising it as the "right" path, she embraced it easily, and the timing felt perfect: "It's the right time for me".

Sophie sees herself as highly attuned to the rhythms shaping her life. She describes the ecological transition as a force guiding her values and aspirations – one that continues to drive her never-ending progress: "Growing up is always happening". Her narrative highlights the process of learning from taking control of rhythms – recognising which ones shape us, which can be ignored, and how to calibrate them to feel "right" as a path to greater autonomy and agency.

Learning From Zigzagging Between Rhythms – Exemplified by Tobias’ Work-Life Narratives

Tobias’ portrait

Tobias too participated in two biographical narrative interviews (T1: April 2020 and T2: May 2021). His interviews (along with those of other participants) facilitated the identification of the learning process associated with learning from zigzagging between rhythms.

Born in Germany in the late 1980s, Tobias describes his career path after graduating in management as an exaggerated business executive career lifestyle. For eight years, he jumped from one management job to the next, “always hunting for the next position that is better than the other one. Always more money, more prestige”. But after a nervous breakdown, he seriously reconsidered his lifestyle. At the time of the first interview, Tobias had been on an eight-month sabbatical, volunteering with an NGO that cleans beaches. He describes learning to slow down, listen to others, to talk to, and to understand people who are “against everything [he] was doing before”. Yet, he wasn’t done with the business world – he was “desperately trying to find a way to combine these two worlds, [his] business life of before and sustainability”. A year later, in his second interview, he described a tough job market during the Covid-19 pandemic, and a sustainability sector that does not pay a decent living. He was “going back and forth trying not to accept” a job offer, “very well paid again, very secure”, in a company similar to the one he had left two years ago, and finally took it, anxious for stability, he explained.

When rhythms are kept apart

Tobias’ narratives reveal a constant weighing of the pros and cons of his decision making. He justified having gone back to a corporate management position thus:

I still feel that it was one step back; I took maybe two, three, four steps in the right direction but it was again one step back; eh but sometimes, you know, you need to take one step back to then start again and, you know, I think I’m still in the process, in the same process I started two years ago.

Tobias sees the sustainability sector as the “right direction”, implying that his current position is not. His focus on quantifying “steps” reflects a broader tendency to offset negative actions with positive ones. The idea of forward and backward steps highlights a preference for slow, cautious progress, avoiding risks that might threaten social or economic standing. This strategic pacing helps to minimise missed opportunities. Similarly, with “one step back to then start again”, Tobias suggests his intent to return stronger. He signals that influence – such as holding an important position – will enhance his capacity for impact.

Rather than making major compromises or rushing change like Gabriel and Nico, Tobias leverages his impressive career profile to make his way to sustainability. He has mastered the art of moving between two worlds, keeping them separate rather than trying to bring them together. In the corporate system, he maintains status despite privately thinking, “I hate it, I hate it so much”. In his sustainability movement world, he feels “happy”, recalling pictures of himself on a farm where he “just looks very happy”. His zigzagging approach is about balancing conflicting values, aspirations, and norms while navigating both spaces. He thrives in the grey zone, believing that “there is a middle way, there is a grey zone we can do”.

Discussion

These empirical illustrations offer insights into how tensions between work and sustainability temporalities are experienced and given personal meaning. The three stories emphasise that the right time to engage in professional change for the sake of committing to sustainability is different for everyone, dependent among other variables on individual conditions, resources, and biographical experiences. Some narratives, especially retrospective ones, when the transition is considered made already, can give the impression that sustainability demands collide with the life course, requiring urgent and radical personal change, starting with the need to leave a profession completely. In contrast, other narratives, especially if the transition has not concluded, tend to downplay personal trade-offs, implying that the ecological transition is important but disconnected from individual agency – giving the impression of something to be implemented gradually, as if the ecological transition can wait.

Through thorough data analysis – examining contrasts and similarities – patterns emerged in the pace of change and how individuals adjust their professional trajectories accordingly. The identification of three approaches to navigating key *Zeitgebers* – work and sustainability – which participants in the study have in common – namely, (i) *learning from colliding rhythms*, (ii) *learning from keeping control over rhythms*, and (iii) *learning from zigzagging between rhythms* – sheds light on strategies that adults use to extract themselves from alienating situations and the meaning they give to their way of coping.

Alhadeff-Jones (2019), in his theoretical work expanding Lefebvre’s method, introduces three rhythm-related experiences to better understand educational processes. He builds on Lefebvre’s concept of “arrhythmia” to describe rhythms that are out of synch as an *experience of rhythmic dissonance* (p. 173); “eurythmia”, when rhythms are in synch, he calls an *experience of rhythmic resonance* (pp. 175–176); and “polyrhythmia”, when rhythms co-exist, he calls an *experience of rhythmic alternance* (p. 174).

While Alhadeff-Jones’ typology provides a theoretical framework for understanding different rhythmic experiences – namely, moments of dissonance, alternance, and resonance – the empirical findings in this study offer a practical perspective on

how individuals actively engage with these experiences. They reveal how people navigate the interplay between work and sustainability rhythms, shaping their own understanding of what constitutes the “right” rhythm configuration for them, considering their own circumstances.

Conclusion

Some may argue that such narratives do not fully reflect the temporalities that are “really” experienced, but biographical narratives have long been valued as a perspective for understanding the dynamics of social life (Dominicé, 2000; Merrill & West, 2009). Analysing these narratives offers insights into how “we imagine the succession of changes experienced or observed, as well as the temporalities and rhythms they produce” (Alhadeff-Jones, 2023, p. 22). Narratives, in this sense, develop their own momentum, shaping our collective understanding of the personal relationships we can entertain with time. In the context of this research, the narratives contribute to collective perceptions of how pressing personal transitions, such as professional changes, have become in response to the ecological transition.

Understood as stories that are told, reported, and often amplified by the media, personal narratives co-construct the imagined realities of these transitions, inspiring others to envision similar changes. If stories of hasty personal transitions predominate, they can create in some people a sense of falling behind or being late compared with others. Conversely, when prevailing narratives emphasise maintaining the status quo while waiting for a major disruption – albeit hoping it does not arrive too soon – this can foster a feeling of limited personal agency in driving change. Either way, there is a sense that stories about engaging with the ecological transition through work can determine a great deal about the overall rhythm of the ecological transition itself.

As argued in the opening lines of this chapter, we humans struggle to fully grasp what is at stake when confronted with the temporalities associated with climate change and the planetary transformations that may alter the way we live, including for instance not knowing whether transformation will concern our generation or the next. Adult education can create spaces that support individuals in navigating these struggles while also mitigating future challenges. In this paper, rhythms were used as a sensitising concept for analysing empirical material, yet they remain an intuitive notion for anyone – starting with an awareness of biological rhythms like eating and sleeping. Framing climate change and sustainability issues through rhythms makes these complex challenges more tangible and relatable, helping individuals understand them as deeply intertwined with daily life, existential needs, and evolving social norms. As experiences of alienation, eco-anxiety, and feelings of defeat become more prevalent, pedagogical approaches must offer support. Cultivating an awareness of rhythms can be a valuable tool for helping individuals to navigate these challenges and to develop personal ways of relating to change.

Note

- 1 Training leave is an institutionally supported right for employees in France. Under this programme, employees accumulate points that can be used to access continuing education programs.

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15

THE ROLE OF WORK

Understanding Learning Experiences in Higher Education Beyond the Institution

Flora Petrik

Introduction: The Situation of First-Generation Students

Studies of higher education show that the transition to university can be fraught with the risk of social exclusion and thus the reproduction of social inequalities (Boliver, 2017; Finnegan et al., 2014), particularly for students who are the first in their family to attend higher education, so-called “first-generation students” (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Beattie, 2018; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Research on university participation in different European countries consistently shows that students from more affluent and formally educated families are more likely both to enter and to complete higher education (Hauschildt et al., 2024; OECD, 2021), illustrating how education is still socially “inherited.” Compared to the population, students from non-academic backgrounds are underrepresented in almost all European higher education institutions. This has implications for first-generation students and underscores the significance of social background, particularly parental education levels and financial as well as occupational status, for students’ educational experiences and opportunities.

Quantitative data from higher education research can provide a good picture of how *social* inequality translates to *educational* inequality: research shows the persistence of social structures in changing and new conditions (Bathmaker et al., 2016). What often remains hidden in these studies, however, is the perspective of the individuals, their life stories, and their experiences. How do first-generation students experience their transitions to higher education? How do they perceive the requirements and opportunities of studying? What and how do they learn?

The personal challenges for those who are the first in their family to attend university have been well described (Capannola & Johnson, 2022; O’Shea, 2019; Pires & Chapin, 2022), for example the feeling of “outsiderness” (Lanford, 2019)

or of not fitting into academic culture (Phillips et al., 2020; Reay et al., 2009). Notably, there is increasing interest in literature on students' learning processes (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Rozvadská, 2023), highlighting not only their everyday experiences of exclusion or inclusion but also how they use their learning experiences to navigate higher education. Most of the literature treats first-generation students as learners based on their academic performance (Elliott, 2014; Vuong et al., 2010) and the influence of different "cultures" on their learning (Stephens et al., 2012; Wilson & Kittleson, 2013). As well, a smaller body of literature explores learning as lived experiences (Castillo-Montoya, 2018; Merrill & Monteagudo, 2010). These contributions aim at understanding the relationship between personal experiences and academic learning, and how the former can not only further agency and reflexivity but also advance ways of knowing and doing in academia (Allen et al., 2015; Jehangir et al., 2011; Jehangir et al., 2012). What is common to these studies is the focus on learning processes that take place *within* the university (with some exceptions, e.g. Cambero, 2022). However, little attention has yet been paid to their learning *beyond* the institution, for example in the workplace.

There is a strong case for focusing on the role of work when researching first-generation students: not only are these students more prone to enter term-time employment (Lessky & Unger, 2022) but they are also more likely to have regular *prior* work experience (Hauschildt et al., 2024) and employment played a significant role in their lives before they went to university (Lessky, 2023). Lessky's research on Austrian first-in-family university students who have term-time employment while studying shows that work can have multiple meanings for them, beyond holding them back from studying. For these students, work can help stabilise their new role, ease tensions with family, mediate between their social origins and the unfamiliar world of academia, offer a welcome distraction from university demands, and generate affirmation, support, and a sense of competence. Such studies of students and their employment move beyond the separation that institutions (as well as research) create between study and work – and make the case for a deeper understanding of adult learning in the context of work.

Societal change increasingly calls for a renewed focus on the relationship between work and learning in transitions to higher education. Rising living costs, inflation, and housing crises have made paid work a necessity rather than a choice for many students. At the same time, higher education systems are undergoing structural shifts, attracting a more diverse student body, including working adults, older learners, and those without academic family backgrounds (Hauschildt et al., 2024). These changes challenge the outdated model of the traditional full-time student and expose tensions between institutional expectations and lived student realities. Moreover, in a broader political context shaped by neoliberal policy logics, the burden of managing the combination of study and work increasingly falls on individuals rather than institutions. These developments jointly signal a shift in the conditions under which first-generation students navigate their way

through education – and highlight the need for a better understanding of how work shapes, constrains, and sometimes enriches transitions into and through higher education.

This chapter builds on the existing body of literature and assumes that combining work and studies can create not only challenges for first-generation students but also learning experiences. It addresses the following questions:

- What role do work-related learning experiences play in transitions to university?
- How are these processes of learning shaped, produced, and experienced?
- In what sense do they relate to social inequality?

I conducted my research in institutions of higher education in Germany and Austria, introduced in the next section. I then outline my theoretical perspectives on learning and present the research design and methodological approaches. I draw on empirical material from an earlier qualitative study of first-generation students' pathways to and through university. Three case studies allow conclusions to be drawn about the relationships between learning, work, and transitions. The chapter ends with a proposal for conceptualising students' learning processes beyond the institutional perspective.

Context: Higher Education in Germany and Austria

The higher education systems in Germany and Austria share several key characteristics, including a strong emphasis on public universities, which dominate the academic landscapes. In both countries, higher education consists of two primary types of institutions: *Universität* (universities) and *(Fach-)Hochschule* (universities of applied sciences). While both offer academic degrees, they differ in focus, structure, and student demographics. Universities are research-oriented institutions that offer a broad range of academic programmes, including bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. Universities of applied sciences focus on practical, hands-on education, typically in collaboration with industry and local job markets. They cater to students seeking vocational or professional qualifications and emphasise direct employability in fields such as engineering, business, social work, and healthcare. Because of this practical orientation and their closer ties to local industries, universities of applied sciences are often more accessible and attract a higher percentage of first-generation students than traditional universities (Trautwein et al., 2006).¹

Exploring the situation of first-generation students, the question of *access* to higher education arises. A key feature of higher education in Austria and Germany is the absence of tuition fees at public universities,² making education theoretically accessible to all, regardless of socio-economic background. Despite this financial accessibility, first-generation students remain underrepresented at universities in both countries, suggesting that factors beyond cost – such as cultural capital, family expectations, and perceptions of higher education – have a significant influence

on university participation (Lehmann, 2013). Financial aid is available in both countries, though structured differently. In Austria, students from low-income families may apply for state grants (*Studienbeihilfe*), while in Germany, financial support comes from a blend of state grants and interest-free loans that must be repaid after graduation (*Bafög*). Nevertheless, financial aid alone does not seem to significantly shift the demographic makeup of the student body, reinforcing the notion that enrolling in higher education is not solely a financial decision.

Although the number of first-generation students in both Austria and Germany is growing, the world of higher education still seems to be primarily for those for whom academic pathways are already familiar: in Germany, out of 100 students from academic backgrounds, 78 attend university, while only 25 out of 100 students from non-academic backgrounds make it to higher education (Autor:innengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2024). The proportion of first-generation students in Austria is slightly higher than in Germany but the influence of parental education on students' educational trajectories remains significant (Statistik Austria, 2024).

Despite the lack of tuition fees and the availability of financial aid, deep-rooted social and cultural dynamics continue to shape the student population and influence who begins and who finishes higher education courses (Lessky et al., 2021; Müller & Klein, 2023). Although this issue has been highlighted in research for some time, higher education institutions have yet to adequately address the experience of “outsiderness” and thereby risk becoming silently complicit in the reproduction of social exclusion – by overlooking how their own practices, norms, and assumptions may reinforce outsider positions. This includes the lack of acknowledgement of the specific learning experiences acquired in contexts beyond formal education. This raises the question not only of first-generation students' pathways to university but also of their *learning paths*. How and where do they learn – especially given that work plays a central role in first-generation biographies? To answer this question, I use a theoretical framework that combines the notion of transitions as relationally constituted (Walther et al., 2022) with biographical perspectives on learning (Dausien, 2008) and Butler's theories of interpellation and recognition (Butler, 1997, 2010).

Theoretical Perspectives: Transitions, Biography, and Recognition

Thinking about educational transitions *relationally* means focusing on the relationships between structures, actors and institutional regulations involved in life course transitions. A relational perspective on transitions in the context of education and work reveals how pedagogical action, processes of learning, and modes of coping are intertwined and form a constitutive element of transitions. Transitions in the life course, from this angle, are not mere social facts, but are constantly shaped and produced through social practices that evolve across the life course – and lead to the reproduction of inequalities (Walther et al., 2022). Looking at *transitions to higher education through a relational lens* involves a shift from viewing transitions

as isolated, rational decisions or individual steps towards university enrolment and instead, emphasising educational decisions as arising from a mix of biographical experiences, institutional practices, and habitual horizons (Dausien, 2014; Dausien et al., 2016).

Moreover, I choose a biographical perspective on learning processes, in which learning, following Dausien (2008), not only refers to the acquisition of new knowledge and skills but more broadly implies expanding existing structures of meaning, adding new dimensions, and reorganising or “deconstructing” others (Dausien, 2008, p. 166). Biographical learning processes are not systematic and linear but discontinuous and unpredictable (Dausien, 2008, p. 163 f.). In addition, the concept of biography emphasises the social embedding of learning processes. This encompasses not only the socio-economic conditions and social class influences but also the *situational and social contextuality* of learning (Hof, 2018; Bernhard, 2023). Thus, we can understand learning as the socially constituted process in which experience and meaning are produced from actions and experiences. This perspective acknowledges the complex interdependency between social structuring and personal agency. It places the individual and their actions at the centre – without reducing them to mere puppets of social forces, yet also without idealising them as autonomous authors of their own lives.

If learning is thought of not as an individual but as a social practice, then processes of *social recognition* also come into view (Grundmann, 2011; Grundmann et al., 2010; Hof, 2018). Recognition in the context of learning may take the form of diplomas and certificates but is also manifest in social approval. Therefore, a deeper understanding of learning at the nexus of life course, work, and transitions can be gained by focusing on recognition as a central component of micro-social processes. Nevertheless, the concept of recognition appears to be theoretically underdetermined in contemporary discourses on learning. To address this gap, I turn to the socio-philosophical reflections of Judith Butler.³

Following Althusser and Foucault, Butler argues that identity is formed in powerful practices of addressing (Butler, 1997). Her ideas build on the notion that “the way in which we ‘address’, or name, an individual, results in, or contributes to, the constitution of their subjectivity and social positioning and therefore tends to reproduce social inequalities” (Chadderton, 2024, p. 24). Picking up on Althusser’s idea of interpellation, arguing that a subject is constituted as it recognises itself within the process of being “hailed, addressed, named” (Butler, 1997, p. 95), Butler points out that these practices of recognition are prone to failure. From a Butlerian point of view, a subject can reject invocations, modify them, or resist them in other ways. This dynamic interplay of interpellation and (mis-)recognition has tremendous consequences for subjects, as Chadderton summarises: “Subjects who do not fit with dominant norms are often unintelligible or unviable as subjects. . . . This process can also go beyond subjects being not ‘just’ socially unacceptable, their status as a full subject comes into question” (Chadderton, 2024, p. 25). This means that learning processes take place within power-shaped “norms of recognisability”

(Butler, 2010, p. 7) that regulate who may be considered a legitimate student at the university and who is granted belonging in the spheres of academia.

Research Design and Methodological Approaches

To explore the role that work-related learning experiences play in transitions to university, I draw on data produced during my PhD study, “Doing Class Transitions: First-Generation Students in Austria and Germany” (2019–2025), a qualitative research project that analysed transitions to higher education from the perspectives of first-generation students.

Led by the assumption that life histories can offer insights into social conditions (Bron & Thunborg, 2017), different biographical data was generated between February 2019 and January 2022 across four different universities in Austria and Germany: Located in a major global city, “University A” attracts a diverse student population, including many international students, and is known for its academic heritage. “University B” is a younger research university, influenced by the progressive educational movements of the early 20th century. Located in a diversely populated city, the institution attracts many first-generation and migrant-background students. A prestigious traditional research institution, “University C,” has a more homogeneous student body, with a significant portion coming from middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds. “University D” is not seen as an elite institution, which makes it appealing to students looking for professional careers rather than academic or research-oriented careers. Together, these universities represent a broad spectrum of academic traditions, student demographics, and local influences within the German-speaking higher education context.

Seventeen biographical-narrative interviews and 36 autobiographical written stories of students’ educational paths were produced during the project. Whilst biographical interviewing has often been described as a valuable approach to understanding student experiences in higher education (West et al., 2014), written stories prove to be a worthwhile addition for engaging narratively with students. In both approaches, the focus was placed on the subjective relevance of the study participants. Interviews opened with the request, “Please tell me your life story.” Those participants who had accepted an invitation to write about their educational trajectory or to contribute diary-like notes were also free to design their contributions as they pleased. The interviews ranged from one to three hours and were transcribed verbatim; the written stories are between five and 20 pages long.

The sampling strategy, the logic of data collection, and the data analysis were developed in the style of grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to generate new hypotheses on the phenomenon of transitions to higher education. I chose first-generation students of bachelor’s, master’s, or doctoral programmes in the humanities and social sciences for the sample, which allowed me to focus

on the discipline-specific cultures that shape university socialisation (Becher & Trowler, 2001).

Case Studies

The role of work-related learning experiences in transitions can be illustrated by three case studies, those of “Eva,” “Fanni,” and “Miriam.” Their biographical experiences are not intended to be regarded as ideal types but rather to elucidate the diverse facets of work-related learning experiences in transitions. The social practices of learning that emerge in the biographical interviews of these three students are a common thread running through all the empirical data, albeit manifest in varying forms.

From full-time work to full-time work and study

Eva was 44 years old at the time of the interview, in her fourth semester of a BA in Education at University A. Together with her five little brothers, she had grown up in an Austrian village, her mother was at home full time, and her father was an engineer. After dropping out of her first degree, translation studies, Eva moved to a bigger city, completed various pedagogical training courses, and then worked as a kindergarten teacher for several years. Now, besides studying again, she works full-time as a preschool teacher and has an 18-year-old daughter.

During her interview, Eva repeatedly referred to her boss in her current job, Hannah, whom she called her “mentor” and who became the central actor in her transition to university. On the one hand, she was a role model for Eva because of her own study experience and on the other hand, she explicitly encouraged Eva to take up education studies, as many of her colleagues studied education as well and she believed that it could enhance Eva’s chances on the job market.

She was like “Hey, you go to university, everybody studies, do it” and then I was like “Ok, I’ll do it” [*laughter*] and that’s how I ended up in Education Studies. . . . And, well, my boss started studying very late; she didn’t start until she was 50 and then finished at 52. She was simply amazing.

She really appreciated how we work and yes, and in these conversations it was like “Hey, why don’t *you* do that?”

By encouraging her to return to university and pursue a higher education qualification, Eva’s employer Hannah played a role that no one else had in Eva’s first-generation biography. Instead, her parents had continuously questioned the benefits of studying. In the interview, Eva also emphasised how she and her family, her mother in particular, now live in “completely different worlds” and have no

shared interests nor even a common language. Here, too, Hannah fulfils a compensatory function:

Hannah, she once said, “Well, if anything happens, come to me,” and that’s still the case now. When I have a decision to make, I call her, because she has more experience, and she has already done a lot of things. And I called her again yesterday. She is really there and really has good ideas. Because I can’t call my mum and say, “Mum, what should I do?”

The experiences Eva had while working were significantly shaped by her interactions with her boss, who served as a “significant other” (Mead, 1934) in her transition to university. The continuing interaction between them contains an affirmation: not only was Hannah signalling that Eva was good at what she does but that she was *so* good that she should further deepen her competences through academic study. Through this experience of recognition, Eva not only learned to value her competences but was also encouraged to reorganise her biography, to increase her agency, and to become a university student.

The case study illustrates that work-related learning experiences in the form of mentorship played a central role in Eva’s transition to university. Her work environment was a crucial social element in her decision to start studying, compensating for a lack of family support. Work thus becomes the site of biographical learning processes that shaped the life course transition from working full-time to working full-time *and* studying.

From working full time to studying

Fanni, 50 years of age, was also the first in her family to attend university. At the time of the interview, she was in her second semester of Education Studies at University A. At the same time, she worked as a freelancer and gave creative writing courses. Like Eva, Fanni grew up in an Austrian village; her mother ran a coffee house and her father worked in a cardboard factory. She transitioned from full-time employee to student after being sacked from her job in public relations that she had held for 18 years. She was asked to leave because the firm wanted to cut costs, but she also believes that the decision was related to her age. Being dismissed plunged Fanni into a major personal crisis. Eventually, a labour market organisation offering free counselling suggested the prospect of studying. The institution’s primary goal is to support the professional development, training, and employment prospects of workers and job seekers, providing special programmes to help unemployed individuals re-enter the workforce, to support women in their professional careers, and to provide guidance to those looking to upskill or switch careers. In this context, Fanni was assigned a career counsellor, Mrs. Sanders, whom she presented as a heroine in her biography.

It was so formative the way she treated me. . . . If I hadn’t had her then . . . Because my focus was: “I have to go back to work immediately”. . . And I thought to

myself: “I’ll do a course somewhere very quickly”. . . something the company will cover. Some vocational college, some training, something at [name of private university] – they really do great things. But they cost a lot of money, and it wasn’t covered by what the company paid. And I thought I’d pay for it, and she [Mrs. Sanders] said, “No, that’s not possible. Either they cover it or not!” and she said, “You don’t have to spend so much,” she said. I said, “But –” – “Do a normal course of study.” I said, “I can’t study for three years. Then I’ll be fifty-three. What will I do then? Then I’ll never get a job again.” She said, “Why? That’s not true.” So, she gave me this . . . confidence I didn’t have at that time, but she sowed this notion in me that people aged 53 still have a chance on the labour market. Although everyone tells you as soon as you have a five in the front, you’re gone.

Her shift into higher education was shaped by a meeting with a career counsellor, who encouraged her to pursue a course of study. Not only did Mrs. Sanders convince Fanni that she was not too old for such a transition but she also ensured that her client incurred no more costs than necessary. As there were no tuition fees, university study was a better option for Fanni than expensive further training that would not have been covered by her severance pay.

Again and again in the interview, Fanni referred to her counsellor Mrs. Sanders as a “very super important woman in my life.” Like Eva’s boss Hannah, she appeared as a significant other in the biographical narrative. Mrs. Sanders not only gave her the idea to study but also broke with the normative ideas that had limited Fanni’s agency hitherto. In their interactions, Fanni was confronted by an existential recognition: she experienced herself as valuable and capable, in the labour market and beyond. The devaluation that Fanni had felt at her previous job was somewhat balanced by this experience of recognition. It ultimately led to her reflecting on and reorganising her self-image and developing an identity as a student.

Fanni’s case shows that learning experiences in the social context of career counselling can play a central role in transition to university. Losing her job was a trigger to reassess her career prospects, while the support of Mrs. Sanders as a mentor was crucial for her decision-making and biographical learning. The opportunity space (Hof, 2022) of career counselling allowed Fanni to reorganise her identity, shaping her educational transition. However, this was not a passive process: Fanni actively engaged with and appropriated this opportunity space, using it to reinterpret her past experiences and to envision new educational possibilities. In addition, her case reveals how learning experiences in the context of work tend to be related to categories of inequality such as age and gender.

From school to university and work

Miriam was 26 years old at the time of my interview with her, had recently completed a master’s in Sociology at University B, and was looking to start a PhD. Together with her siblings and parents, an electrician and a secretary, Miriam grew up in a rural area in Germany. She attended primary school there and then transferred to the grammar

school in a neighbouring village, where she was the first in her family to obtain a university entrance qualification. Miriam's narrative shifts the focus from work-related learning experiences *prior* to studying to such experiences *whilst* studying. By financial necessity, while studying she worked in casual or part-time conditions. These were never "typical" low-wage student jobs, but always jobs at the university, related to her academic interests, for example in research projects or in institutes.

In her interview, Miriam explained that she would have liked to take up more courses during her BA and MA studies, but that was impossible given that she was working. She described doing paid work alongside her studies on the one hand as a time burden ("Well, what was actually stressful about studying was more the work around it"), and on the other hand as a restrictive, authoritarian structure that becomes the antithesis of life at university. "There are constantly some kind of employment situations where you are told: 'You have to do this and that now – and don't you dare not do it!'"

Miriam described numerous scenes that she remembered negatively, in which her superiors overwhelmed her with work assignments at short notice, called her in the middle of the night, and ignored her working hours. Referring to her boss, she recounted:

He said, "Yes, and besides, you must know, *I* say how this and that works." So, I never interfered with him in any planning or anything, and he says, "Yes but now you do what *I* tell you and this is how it works." Or he told me, "Yes, I know you really want to convince me logically, but here the seniority principle applies. I am a professor – you are not. So now you do it like this." [*laughs*]

Miriam's boss put her in a clearly inferior position in the way he addressed her. In his view, his status as professor gave him the right to make the rules that his employees must follow – and also to decide when and by whom these rules may be questioned. The "seniority principle" applied, social positioning overriding logical objections. Although Miriam described the event with laughter and an ironic undertone, the interaction can be understood as limiting, restricting, and ultimately disempowering. However, it can still be considered a learning experience. In the biographical narrative, Miriam dismissed the pejorative interpellation and interpreted it as a lack of leadership qualities, and authoritarian behaviour on the part of her superior. Thus, unlike Eva and Fanni, Miriam's work-related learning experience was not characterised by recognition but by misrecognition in the way she was addressed.

Miriam's learning experiences in her work environment at university were formative for her transition and her entire time at university. These experiences were dual in nature: being employed at the university gave her the opportunity to work in an academic environment, which was relevant to her studies and exposed her to academic practices. However, her employment came with an authoritarian management style that undermined her process of recognising herself as a legitimate member of the academic field. The social context of the university workplace was

crucial to the way she experienced and interpreted those experiences. The student's ability to reflect on the situation – and thereby to misrecognise the pejorative address by her supervisor by attributing it to his lack of leadership skills – demonstrates a form of biographical learning: she learned to reorganise her experiences, thereby strengthening her capacity to act within the context of her studies. Moreover, the case portrait highlights a challenge typically faced by first-generation students, as Miriam is both financially dependent on her work and *symbolically* dependent on recognition from representatives of the university.

Discussion

This chapter addressed the questions:

- What role do work-related learning experiences play in transitions to university?
- How are these processes of learning shaped, produced, and experienced?
- In what sense do they relate to social inequality?

Students' learning experiences take place not only within the institutions of higher education and during their studies but also *beyond* – both spatially and temporarily. In terms of space, learning is located both at the workplace and in related contexts (e.g., career counselling). In terms of time, learning in the transition to university takes place before and during the entry into university.

In exploring the role of work-related learning experiences in transitions to university, the three case studies presented here illustrate that such experiences are critical sites for biographical learning among first-generation students. These students are confronted with the complex and often contradictory expectations of their work environments, academic settings, parental figures, and their own aspirations. In negotiating these norms of recognisability (Butler, 2010), subjects expand existing structures of meaning and need to reorganise their selves (Dausien, 2008). However, work-related learning experiences are multifaceted; while some students encounter empowering recognition through their work, others face degradation and hierarchical challenges. Ultimately, both dimensions constitute learning experiences.

Learning in work-related contexts is shaped by the dynamic interplay of personal experiences (e.g. coming from a non-academic home), social workplace dynamics (e.g. role of superiors or colleagues), institutional action (e.g. programmes for professional development and counselling), and structural factors (e.g. presence or absence of tuition fees). Particularly, the cases demonstrate how “significant others” shape learning processes – both positively (reinforcing and encouraging) and negatively (authoritarian and restrictive). The analysis shows that significant others play crucial roles in learning processes, in the form of mentors, role models, peers, and superiors. They not only shape the work experience in the sense of creating a community of practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991/2008) but are also significantly

involved in the production of transitions to and through higher education. These significant others are involved in all stages of the transition and in various contexts: employment prior to studying, counselling between work and studying, and employment at university while studying.

In relation to social inequality, the case studies reveal that work-related learning experiences often exacerbate existing disparities, as first-generation students face more barriers in navigating the academic field than their peers from middle- and upper-class backgrounds. First-generation students lack a “blueprint” for the transition to university, and consequently, they are particularly reliant on significant others who can show them potential pathways, and on structural conditions that facilitate access. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that the intersectional entanglement of inequality (e.g. social class, age and gender) impedes learning processes and generates disadvantage. Finally, the findings emphasise the need for a nuanced understanding of how work-related learning experiences are not only formative for individual students but are also indicative of broader social conditions that can perpetuate inequalities in transitions to and through higher education.

Such ideas have implications for theorising learning experiences and for institutional practices in higher education. Reemphasising the relational nature of learning is crucial if institutions are to respond meaningfully to the diverse realities of today’s student populations (West et al., 2013). This includes acknowledging that many students – particularly those from non-academic backgrounds – are not primarily students who happen to work, but workers who also study. Employment should be recognised as a central element of students’ biographies and as a meaningful site of learning rather than as a distraction or deficit. Such a shift in perspective requires a rethinking of academic cultures that often implicitly see work as an obstacle to study. Pedagogical approaches are needed that take students’ working lives seriously – acknowledging them as valuable sources of capability (Lessky, 2023; O’Shea, 2019).

Conclusions

Work-related learning usually refers to the acquisition of knowledge and skills that can be considered a resource at university and implies reciprocal relearning or unlearning, for example challenging identities or reorganising roles (Dausien, 2008; Mezirow, 2018). Conceptualising learning during life course transitions as a socially embedded process (Bernhard, 2023; Hof, 2017) shifts the focus to social processes of recognition. However, the study presented here shows that work-related learning experiences are constituted not only in social processes of recognition but also in misrecognition. Learning is not constituted through *either* recognition *or* misrecognition but rather involves complex entangled social practices: within the processes of interpellation in work-related contexts, subjects are treated as (il)legitimate learners. In these practices of addressing, subjects can recognise themselves – or misrecognise the effort and thus reject the suggested subject

position (Butler, 1997). Thus, learners are positioned socially “within existing, sometimes shifting, social hierarchies based on gendered, raced and classed structures” (Chadderton, 2024, p. 24). Accordingly, work-related learning experiences in transitions to university can be understood as dynamic interplay of social processes of mis/recognition.

The findings presented here highlight the need for further research into diversity among those we call first-generation students. Their biographical experiences and the role that work plays in their educational trajectories are highly heterogeneous. A nuanced understanding of these elements is essential to understanding how social inequality is reproduced in higher education institutions, and to developing strategies for overcoming it.

Additionally, the research shows the nonlinear and interwoven character of transitions to university, which extends beyond the traditional paths. Transitions occur not only from school to university but also from work to university, and increasingly, from solely working to combining work and study. Consequently, transitions to higher education are no longer typically accompanied by a distinct change in social status. The relational and overlapping nature of transitions suggest that students are rarely faced with a clear-cut choice between work and study but are instead navigating their interconnectedness (Lessky, 2023). This evolving dynamic offers promising avenues for further research on adult learning beyond the institution and the ways in which higher education and employment are integrated in contemporary life courses.

Notes

- 1 To avoid the complexity of the different types of higher education institutions and subject cultures, this chapter focuses on social sciences and humanities degrees at universities (see section on methods and sampling).
- 2 In Austria this only applies to students coming from the EU or Switzerland, adhering to the standard period of study. There are also exceptions in Germany: in some states, students who exceed the standard period of study or who take up a second-degree programme are charged annual tuition fees between 400 and 650 euros.
- 3 Unlike other studies on non-traditional students, which work productively with Honneth's recognition theory (e.g. West et al., 2013), this study applies Butler's conceptualisation. Following Butler, recognition is not limited to affirming responses but can also be found in non-affirmative forms of address. The risk of relying solely on Honneth's concept (2014) lies in its normative understanding of recognition, which tends to conceptualise it as merely a positive feature of pedagogical institutions and relationships – and leads to asking only “how much” recognition is granted, rather than how it operates in more complex or ambivalent ways (Balzer & Ricken, 2010).

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16

EMPLOYEES' INDIVIDUAL LEARNING PATHS DURING ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

A Comparison of Professional Development Strategies

Rob F. Poell, Cara Valk, and Ferd Van Der Krogt

Managers often rely on the professional development (PD) of their employees to implement organisational change. They may, for example, try to introduce new ways of working using educators to create learning programmes that stimulate employees to develop the skills necessary for such changes (Poell & Van Der Krogt, 2014). How do employees react to those changes and measures? How do they participate in learning programmes initiated by managers? It does not appear to be a matter of course that employees always operate according to the “learning plans” that managers and educators design (Admiraal-Hilgeman & Geurts, 2011; De Jong, 2010; Lilova & Poell, 2019; Poell, 2022; Schenk et al., 2018; Van Veen et al., 2012; Van Veldhuizen, 2011); they often do not participate actively, and the effects are only moderate. Do managers and employees operate according to the intentions of other stakeholders when implementing PD plans created by other actors in and around the organisation (e.g., government institutions and in-service providers), or do they set their own priorities and strategies?

Professional development involves adult learning in the context of work, which for many adults is a major part of their lives. In this chapter, we look at how PD occurs during organisational transitions. These may not span the whole life course but are a pervasive characteristic of modern work life, which means that many people must deal with them many times during their work life. Investigating employees' PD strategies is an important task, then, in understanding adult learning at the intersection of work, life course, and transitions.

We use the concept of an individual learning path, which refers to a set of work-related learning activities that are coherent and meaningful to an employee (Poell et al., 2018). Individual employees can act strategically in creating their learning paths, making use of existing affordances and adding new ones to the existing learning network of their organisation. The individual learning path and the

organisation's learning network are the two key concepts in the Learning-Network Theory (LNT) that we use here. By linking individual learning to the dynamics of the organisation in which it occurs (and evolves), LNT adds a new lens to the study of adult learning at the intersection of work, life course, and transitions. Before explaining LNT further, we present three theoretical approaches to organising PD that have informed it.

Three Theoretical Approaches to PD

Theories about organising PD have changed significantly in the past four decades, particularly about the roles of managers and employees (cf. Garavan et al., 2023; Yorks et al., 2022). We distinguish three useful approaches in the literature: (1) didactic customisation, (2) self-directed learning, and (3) micro-politics.

Didactic PD: Customised delivery by educators

Central to the didactic approach is the design and delivery of training programmes fine-tuned to the organisation's problems and employees' skills. Educators take inventory of the problems and developments in the organisation and identify the needs and skills of the employees (Romiszowski, 1981). The expertise of educators is crucial here: they both design and deliver the training programmes.

PD as a learning issue: Self-directed learning by employees

The conceptual shift from "training" to "learning" produced a significant turnaround in thinking about the organisation of PD. Employees participate not only in education and training programmes that explicitly stimulate learning processes but also in the implementation and improvement of work processes recognised as essential mechanisms in employee learning (Lecat et al., 2020; Tannenbaum et al., 2010; Tannenbaum & Wolfson, 2022). Such participation is often studied through concepts like self-directed learning (Margaryan et al., 2013; Morris, 2019).

PD as a strategic issue for managers and employees: A micro-political approach

Training and development have long been considered primarily as a management tool (Robinson & Robinson, 1989), but recently, the personal responsibility of employees has been stressed. Accordingly, the organisation of PD has also become a micro-political issue: actors in the organisation – including managers, educators/trainers, and employees – have their own visions of and interests in PD (Anderson, 2009; Lundgren & Poell, 2023; Soudien & Harvey, 2021).

Differences among the three approaches

These approaches differ from each other in three aspects (nature of the HRD processes, positions and roles of the actors, and vision on the organisation). Firstly, the nature of PD processes varies. With didactic customisation, the emphasis is on a systematic, pedagogical, and technological approach. With self-directed learning, employees' motivation to learn is the focal point: if employees have the required information at their disposal, they will use the available learning opportunities. In the micro-political approach, negotiations among organisational actors about facilities and direction of PD are central.

Secondly, the positions and roles of actors differ among the three approaches. In the didactic approach, the role of the expert educator is crucial. This person focuses training programmes on specific problems in the organisation and takes into consideration differences among clients. In the self-directed learning approach, the emphasis lies mainly on the role of the learning employee. There, the employee is assisted and guided by other actors who, it is assumed, share views about the importance of PD. The micro-political approach deals with the various interests of different actors. The most influential actors have the greatest means at their disposal to bring about the learning they desire.

The third difference among the approaches can be found in the vision of the organisation in which PD processes are taking place. With didactic customisation, PD training programmes address problems of the organisation. Self-directed learning recognises that important learning conditions are present in the organisation, and concurrence in values and norms is of crucial significance. In the micro-political approach, both learning conditions and learning objectives are subject to negotiation; each actor has their own interest in how PD is organised and what attempts are made to obtain facilities to address those interests. As we explain in the following section, LNT links these three approaches and yields a clearer picture of how PD plays out in organisational practice than if we focus on any one of the approaches.

Theoretical Background: Learning-Network Theory

The central idea of learning-network theory is that together, the actors involved give shape to PD processes. They do so through their interactions with each other. They depend on each other because they need information and expertise and because they want the means to actualise their ideas. They exchange information about that and also negotiate with each other, make compromises, and solve conflicts. In LNT, organising PD is interaction among managers, educators, employees, and other actors, taking place within the organisation.

Through mutual interaction, actors determine the content (topics, learning objectives) and format (training programmes, workplace experiences) of PD processes. During

these interactions, actors bring their own ideas and preferences to the table. Most of the time, views do not completely overlap, so actors deliberate with each other, conduct negotiations, and attempt to convince each other of the importance of their vision (Bunderson & Reagans, 2011; Parding & Abrahamsson, 2010; Verberg et al., 2013).

The positions of the actors within the organisation greatly influence how they operate in PD processes (Hardy & Melville, 2013; Hodgkinson & Hodgkinson, 2004). The levels of authority and relationships with other actors determine, for instance, the leeway someone has to experiment at work, to work at their chosen career, and to decide which explicit learning activities they will join (Deakin Crick et al., 2013; Evers et al., 2011; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Already-existing PD structures also influence the activities of actors in PD processes (e.g., learning facilities, and procedures for participation in external programmes).

In addition to PD structures, the views of the actors themselves play a large role in the participation in PD processes. Actors have their own ideas about the ends that PD can serve and about the ways in which PD structures and other actors influence those.

Networks in organising PD

Networks play a significant role in organising PD, and in two aspects in particular (De Jong, 2010; De Lima, 2010; Varga-Atkins et al., 2010). Firstly, there exists a network structure within organisations. This refers to the positions of actors, mutual relationships, levels of authority (to use facilities, to exploit expertise), and space to actualise personal ideas in PD processes (Borgatti & Foster, 2003; Gulati, 2007; Kilduff & Tsai, 2003).

The second aspect of networks is mutual interaction among actors (De Laat, 2012; Poekert, 2012; Wenger, 1998). Professional development is a social process. Employees can establish contacts with internal and external colleagues, managers, experts, and coaches/mentors. Through these interactions, people mostly think of exchanging information, giving feedback, and making explicit and clarifying opinions and viewpoints. Terms like coaching, mentoring, supporting, and giving feedback express these forms of interaction. However, actors will not always collaborate harmoniously and work at PD in the same direction. Interaction can also imply influencing, negotiating, and solving conflicts. Each actor has their own ideas about the purposes of PD and about the ways in which it should be organised (Coleman et al., 2017).

The interactions are strongly influenced by the network structure (Roberts, 2006), but employees and other actors also have personal and informal contacts they can use when organising PD. In due course, these informal contacts can be institutionalised and subsequently become part of the network structure.

Actors play an important role in the organisation of PD. They form the link between organisational structures and PD structures on the one hand and the proceedings of PD processes on the other hand. Their *modus operandi* in PD processes

and ways in which they employ PD structures and actor networks to actualise their own ideas about PD we call “operating strategically”.

Organising learning programmes and learning paths in organisations

We can distinguish four PD processes: learning policies, learning programmes, learning paths, and learning processes. For clarification, we refer to Poell and Van Der Krogt (2017). In strategies used by managers and employees, two processes are of great importance: learning programmes and the creation of learning paths.

The creation of learning programmes by educators (and other actors)

Learning programmes come about when an actor takes the initiative to stimulate certain groups of employees to learn about certain topics systematically. A programme group is formed consisting of PD staff (trainers, educators) and employees themselves, while other actors can also be involved (managers, HR managers, content experts, and external colleagues).

Learning programmes in organisations often arise at the initiative of managers who want to use staff development systematically in order to reduce problems and to support the implementation of their plans. The learning programme group plays a crucial role in the organisation of learning programmes. This group undertakes two types of activities: creating relevant learning experiences and (re)directing the programme. Various learning situations can be created: explicit learning such as in workshops, courses, study assignments, and individual self-study. Work experiences of the participants can also be used.

The learning programmes can be directed in different ways, one of which is to elaborate on the learning topic. That can lead to detailed learning plans, but the group can also limit itself to global topics and concretise them gradually. Another principle of steering the learning programme is to address problems as they occur along the way.

The actors who form the nucleus of the organisation of learning programmes interact with each other and thus create experiences and give direction to those experiences. How they do that depends strongly on their views, and these opinions determine how they use available structures. Learning programmes can be organised in different ways (Poell & Van Der Krogt, 2014). Various actors can be involved in the programmes, and they can employ different experiences and manage programmes in different ways.

The creation of learning paths by employees (and other actors)

The second process that influences the PD of employees is the creation of learning paths (Poell et al., 2018). Actors other than employees themselves play an

important role in learning programmes; managers, educators, and advisors often take the initiative. With a learning path, however, employees themselves play the most important role. They try to self-direct the experiences to be gained inside and outside of the organisation. These can include all kinds of experiences relevant to their PD. The employee takes courses and follows training sessions, has coaching conversations, reads books and manuals, does their job (and maybe changes it), solves problems, participates in innovation projects, takes on a different job title, conducts performance interviews, and so forth. Within that broad scale of activities, employees find their way and create and take advantage of possibilities. This we call the creation of a learning path.

Learning paths are created through interactions between employees and other internal and external actors. The process consists of gaining experiences in three ways: 1) in the primary process, they gain work experiences, 2) in the process of career development, they work on their employability, and 3) in the PD processes, they attempt explicit learning. Moreover, employees can direct and coordinate their individual learning paths in three ways: 1) in creating a scope of topics (thematising) the subject of the learning path gradually becomes explicit, 2) in reducing the number of professional problems (problem solving) the learning path is brought further into line with their views, and 3) in employing explicit PD strategies, the learning path more closely matches their values and norms (Poell & Van Der Krogt, 2016).

Employees can create learning paths in different ways. They can select a route from the learning opportunities already available. They study the map, as it were, select a route, and follow it. In the process, they can ask others for advice. Such a learning path looks like the concept of a “learning career” that is explored in vocational education.

Another approach is that each employee develops their own plan and course of action, selects learning opportunities, and possibly develops them – for instance, by including certain work experiences in their plan – and then gets to work on it, adjusting the plan if necessary. This is a more open learning path wherein the employee, along with others, creates opportunities informally, for instance, with a small working group interested in certain subjects. The approach reflects ideas about communities of practice (Nicolini et al., 2022; Wenger, 1998).

A last option is where an employee is working on an idea or a topic that intrigues them and about which they want to know more, but they choose to wait to see what results from it and then decide how to proceed. Here, learning paths look like individual learning projects, a composite of learning activities – or “learning episodes” – that employees undertake themselves during a certain period on a selected topic (Fiedler & Völjtaga, 2020; Sexton, 1990).

Sub-questions guiding our empirical study

In order to gain more insight into the PD strategies of managers and employees, we gathered and analysed data among school teachers and managers. The following sub-questions guided our empirical analysis: 1) How do managers operate when

creating projects and learning programmes? 2) How do employees operate in projects and learning programmes? and 3) To what extent do patterns in their modus operandi point to managers' and employees' strategies in organising PD?

Empirical Investigation

The objective of our comparative case study was two-fold: 1) to develop a theory about the organisation of PD in organisations and 2) to develop knowledge about the role of employees and managers therein. The theoretical emphasis here is on theory about the PD strategies of managers and employees. We focused on the secondary school sector partly because it afforded easy access to an existing community of practice, and partly because PD is a hot topic in secondary schools, where teachers have ample autonomy to direct their own PD activities, even within the limits of managers' organisational change projects.

Design

Action research was performed for six change projects in three schools, two projects in each school. Schools, manager-initiated projects, and related learning programmes were described and analysed using LNT, guided by the main research questions and the sub-questions listed earlier. The results were discussed during six workshops (one for each project). As well as discussing the organisation of each project, particularly how the PD programmes for teachers were organised, we studied the actions of participating teachers in their PD, including their individual learning paths (Figge, 2012; Hendriks, 2013; Van Roekel, 2012). The results of these discussions form the basis of the analyses presented in this chapter.

Data collection and analysis

We began by studying documents about the school and projects, including annual reports, policy papers, and minutes of meetings. These data helped us to form an image of each school and its project. These images were further developed through interviews and our discussions. We then conducted semi-structured interviews with members of the school administration about the organisation of the school, PD programmes, change projects, and learning programmes. Participating teachers were also interviewed about their views of PD in their school and of the project, and about their activities in the project. The interviews were of a rather open nature. Responses to closed lists of questions might have given the impression that actors have clear ideas and views about organising PD, whereas the interviews clearly show that teachers and administrators do not have clear ideas about the organisation of PD in the school and find it difficult, for instance, to formulate learning objectives.

Learning-network theory framed our data collection and analysis, and also helped in discussions about the organisation of PD among teachers. It helped teachers and

school leaders to explain their views to each other and to researchers. For example, during a workshop, discussion arose about the responsibilities of teachers and school leaders for PD in the school and about the purposes that PD in schools have for the various actors.

Feedback and observation during the workshops

For each project, documents and interviews were analysed using LNT and discussed in a workshop that included project representatives (school leaders, project leaders, teachers). The aim of the workshops was to validate the preliminary analyses and to discuss concrete alternatives for the organisation of PD in the school. Audio recordings were made of all interviews and workshops. These were transcribed verbatim for the benefit of coding and notes were taken for the benefit of the final analysis.

Data collection and analysis largely ran parallel to the action research. Interpretation of data also occurred during collection, and comparisons were made among the three schools and the six projects. We systematically investigated the extent to which leaders and teachers operated differently in the projects and learning programmes.

Selection of research participants

The three schools that participated in our study self-selected in response to a call for expressions of interest distributed by the regional school authorities. These schools are typical of state schools in the Netherlands. Catering to students of all genders, aged 12–18, they offer general (i.e., non-vocational) education from pre-vocational secondary education (vmbo) to senior general secondary education (havo) and pre-university education (vwo). However, three schools do not constitute a probability sample: it is likely that professional development is high on the agenda of these schools and that they undertake more PD activities than average. In consultation with each school administration, we decided on two projects in which PD was important, clarified our research design, and decided which school administrators would participate in the study. This consultation about the participating teachers was done to limit the number of cancelled classes. Interviews about the school and projects were held with the principal, 3 department heads, 2 project leaders and 4 teachers at A-College, with the principal, 3 vice-principals, 2 project leaders and 4 teachers at B-College, and the principal, 2 department heads, 4 teachers at C-College. Interviews about learning paths were conducted with 6 to 8 teachers per project at A-College, 7 to 9 teachers per project at B-College, and 26 teachers from 2 departments at C-College.

Results

Table 16.1 summarises the major findings from the three schools and six projects. We will then present comparisons of them.

TABLE 16.1 Overview of findings from six change projects in three schools.

<i>School</i>	<i>College A</i>		<i>College B</i>		<i>College C</i>
<i>Project</i>	<i>Vwo+</i>	<i>ERK</i>	<i>CSE</i>	<i>Activating Teaching Methods</i>	<i>Stimulating Personal Responsibility of Teachers</i>
Initiation	By teacher together with members of school administration	By member of school administration (head of department)	By school leaders; a member of the school administration in consultation with teachers analyses the problem	By teacher upon deliberation in staff meeting	Policy topic of central leadership team; desire for teachers to initiate their own plans, individually and in departments
Learning Programme	Extensive programme set up by teacher	Two part-day courses directed by an external educator; group meetings prepared by school leaders together with a teacher	Policy preparation; much internal consultation between school leaders and subject departments; teachers develop own ideas about problem and how subject departments can contribute to solving it	Extensive programme set up by teacher	Not explicitly deployed by school leaders
Participation by Teachers	Various reactions	Limited group following	Various reactions	Most teachers are active followers	Few teachers react to ideas from school leaders

College A

At College A, we studied two change projects and related learning programmes: “VWO+” and “ERK”.

VWO+ project and learning programme

The VWO+ had been a project at College A since 2005, when people there began to think about how to provide gifted students with an adapted programme. What should teaching methods look like for gifted students? The project was tightly structured. A teacher was the project leader, supported by someone from the administration. The school leaders “invited” two teachers from each discipline to participate in the development project. The teacher selected as the project leader was the driving force behind the development project. She had clear ideas about the topic, content, and progress of the project. Her research experiences during her own further training in relation to “giftedness” formed the basis for the project.

Teachers in the group received assignments from the project leader and during 10 meetings, the participants talked about their experiences. They worked together during these meetings and completed assignments individually in between meetings.

What the project aimed for was not clear to the participating teachers. They did find the idea of streaming relevant to the education of gifted children but did not see it as applicable to their subject area. In the workshop, it came up that in the project emphasis lay primarily on the purposes that the school leaders attached to it. Thus far, the teachers’ perspectives had not come up much for discussion. That observation was further elaborated during the discussion of three reactions from teachers to the project/learning programme: 1) conscious co-direction, 2) active following, and 3) passive following.

ERK project and learning programme

The ERK project at College A was intended to address attainment levels and assessment criteria for various modern foreign language skills listed in the based on the European Reference Framework (ERK). The idea arose in 2011–2012; school leaders saw the ERK project as preparation for the introduction of ERK. During our investigation, we discovered that not much progress had been made.

A head of department (herself with teaching qualifications in French) was the initiator. First, all modern language teachers took a course of two half-days on ERK, presented by an external expert. Next, the head of the department formed a working group consisting of two representatives, each from four modern language departments (English, French, German, and Spanish). Initially, the head of the department and a teacher formed the project management team, who prepared meetings, but thereafter, the working group was consulted more frequently. At the end of the school year 2011–2012, the teachers from the working group reported

on their activities to a plenary meeting. The working group continued to prepare for the introduction of the ERK by attempting to enthuse the various departments.

The teachers who were interviewed stressed the basic aim of the ERK project: to bring more coherence across foreign language courses. There were those who doubted that this project was necessary for them personally: young teachers were already familiar with ERK, and older teachers indicated that they had so much experience that they could assess the required teaching level and level of students quite well. There were also teachers who were positive about the project and cooperated enthusiastically.

For the school leaders, the purpose of PD in this project was to introduce pedagogical innovation. They saw the members of the working group as engines for further implementation of the ERK in the language departments, and PD for teachers was the way to achieve that. Participating teachers doubted whether they could wield sufficient influence to convince colleagues of the usefulness of the ERK. In the workshop, a view of the project was presented, followed by discussion of the central role of the school leaders and the reactions of the teachers. A very animated discussion arose about that. Teacher participation in the project was also discussed, and a three-fold division of reactions (just like with the VWO+ project) appeared: conscious co-directing, active following, and passive following. Teachers recognised these ways of participating; some indicated that they followed the project mostly passively, while some others co-directed consciously. Teachers also said that, at the start of the ERK project, they had adopted a wait-and-see attitude ("unclear about where it was heading"). Now, they see more relevance and participate more.

College B

At College B, two change projects and related learning programmes were studied: "CSE" and "Activating Teaching Methods".

CSE project and learning programme

A few years ago, a serious discrepancy was observed at College B between the results of school examinations and the national written examinations (CSE). This issue was discussed by school leaders and the educational advisory group. The College wanted to increase the CSE marks of its students and maintain the specific ideological character of the school.

Thus, the CSE project was intended to address a policy problem. The process was run by the educational advisory group, which advises the school leaders. The latter presented their vision to the disciplines and invited them to develop their ideas for solutions. In the summer of 2011, school leaders spoke with representatives from all disciplines. These deliberations generated many ideas for increasing CSE marks, and some of the ideas became aims for the next school year. The departments were asked to shape these agreements in the new school year.

But school leaders and teachers had different visions of the problem. The former emphasised the need to correct the academic paths of students and simultaneously to adjust the teaching programmes; teachers saw the problem differently. Some believed that there were few discrepancies in their subject, while others put the reason primarily with students. Yet there were some teachers who wanted to bring about changes in their subject.

From the interviews, it was not clear who held what views about using PD for the improvement of exam results. School leaders paid little explicit attention to PD in the CSE project. They organised plenary meetings and conferred with the subject departments to try to gain support for their view of the problem. They encouraged the disciplines and the teachers to propose concrete changes. They facilitated departmental activities to support the CSE project, for instance, hiring an expert in assessment design. According to the school leaders, teachers themselves would indicate when they wanted to use PD to implement CSE plans. This, however, rarely happened.

In the workshop about the CSE project, an animated discussion arose rather quickly about the responsibilities of school leaders and teachers. Several younger teachers asked for more structure in the school, a clear viewpoint from school leaders about their expectations of the work and the professional development of teachers. School leaders expected a lot from teachers and disciplines regarding analysis and solutions of the CSE problems. But teachers did not feel capable of meeting those expectations. They found it difficult to make an analysis of the CSE problems.

The school leaders' vision of how to organise PD became clearer in the workshop: it would be the responsibility of individual teachers. Teachers should indicate what they want, and normally, school leaders would be willing to facilitate that. This vision was supported by the same educational philosophy that the school applied to students. Teachers, however, thought that school leaders should provide more clarity as well as a framework that teachers could use to organise their work and PD.

"Activating Teaching Methods" project and learning programme

The Activating Teaching Methods project originated with the education advisory group in which an enthusiastic teacher launched an idea about activating methods in the classroom. This initiative fitted well with the new attempts to make education at College B less traditional. An external advisory committee had previously found that there was little variation in the delivery of curricula and that too much was taught through whole-class teaching.

The programme was set up as follows: after regular classes, a small group of 10 teachers – who had previously indicated an interest in activating methods – met together five times over a period of 10 teaching weeks. At the first meeting, participants were acquainted with the concept of activating teaching methods, and during subsequent meetings, one or two activating methods were reviewed each time.

All participants had to prepare an activating lesson and deliver it. Their experiences with these lessons formed the basis for subsequent discussions.

This programme was delivered twice in this way. A total of 20 teachers participated. In the 2110–2011 school year, the initiator called for a colleague to take over the leadership role, but there was no response. Although participants found the programme inspiring, they also found it difficult to apply the concept in their disciplines and to connect it to their other activities. For the school leaders, the project afforded a possibility to bring about school development based on the school's pedagogical identity.

In the workshop, three reasons for PD were identified: educational improvement, career development, and personal development. Subsequently, school leaders suggested that, in PD, the pedagogical identity of the school should be the focus because otherwise, it would be watered down. Teachers said that school leaders should provide more direction in PD and not leave teachers to themselves too much. Much thought was also given to ways of organising learning paths. It became clear that interactions between teachers and other actors (such as school leaders) are crucial for gaining experiences and directing learning paths (thematising, solving problems, using explicit strategies).

College C

At College C, a similar change project, called Stimulating Personal Responsibility of Teachers, was conducted in two departments.

“Stimulating personal responsibility of teachers” project

At the start of our investigation at College C, school leaders were asked which topics or projects in the school received systematic attention, and in which teacher PD played an important role. They seemed to have difficulty pointing to any specific projects. Eventually, a general topic of attention was identified: stimulating the individual responsibility of teachers.

During all our conversations at this college, people were often asked about this subject, but it appeared not to be clear for those involved what the topic was actually all about, nor what role the professional development of teachers would play in it. Nor did the project become any clearer from the interviews with school leaders, project coordinators, and teachers. The school leaders could not define the topic or the role of PD, and teachers were barely aware of the school leaders' ideas.

The workshops discussed the organisation of the project. This too was unclear for many of those present. Exchanges of views between researchers and workshop participants gradually revealed that the school leaders expected the teachers to have a broader range of duties: that teachers on their own accord should participate more actively and personally take more initiatives to perform their tasks and activities. In addition, they should work more actively at their PD. It was ascertained that only a

small group of teachers dedicated themselves to such a broader range of activities. The school leaders expected that PD could play a role in this project, but did not see clearly how that should take shape. Teachers were given a lot of time and financial support to develop and implement ideas themselves for professional development.

But the teachers appeared to have strongly divergent views about PD. Their feeling was that they received little support or incentive to work on PD and that the PD structure and learning climate offered few starting points. They also experienced little direct support from school leaders. According to the school leaders, they offered all kinds of support to teachers but it was not taken up. Teachers wanted to work on subject development and subject-related teaching methods, and less on general pedagogical/didactic issues.

Comparisons among schools and among projects

The projects in Colleges A and B concern the general pedagogical habits of teachers (Activating Teaching Methods, and specific teaching methods in VWO+). The other projects in these colleges concern the structure of teaching programmes per subject/school year (CSE, ERK). At College C, both projects address the same topic: how to stimulate teachers to assume more personal responsibility for their own PD. This was an initiative of the school leaders; there is little enthusiasm for it among teachers. According to the former, subject content and subject-related teaching methods are the responsibility of teachers, while school leaders are responsible for the overall structure of teaching programmes and students' academic progress.

Professional development activities

In both projects at College A, PD is expressly deployed in structured learning programmes initiated by school leaders but also shaped by teachers. At College B, a learning programme is the explicit focus of the Activating Teaching Methods (ATM) project, while it is only implicit in the CSE project. School leaders expect teachers to adopt it as their own and to adapt subject programmes accordingly. At College C, school leaders talk about stimulating teachers to take PD initiatives, but those in leadership positions have taken no steps in that direction. So far, there are no learning programmes to support the change project.

Actors participating in projects

Teacher participation in projects and learning programmes varies strongly. In both projects at College A, teachers participate actively. This may be because the school leaders made participation mandatory. At College B, many teachers participate voluntarily in the ATM project, and the CSE project is directly connected to what the disciplines are already doing. At College C, the change projects in both departments are hardly known among teachers.

The role and responsibility of teachers and school leaders for PD are expressly discussed in the workshops at Colleges B and C. At the latter, much attention is paid to the participation of teachers. Yet it is also typical that in six workshops there was little discussion about how future PD for teachers in projects can be addressed. This can imply that actors have few ideas about organising PD in school.

Discussion: Conclusions and Perspectives

What do these case studies teach us about the *modus operandi* and the strategies of employees and people in leadership positions when organising PD activities in the work place? A first conclusion is that neither managers nor employees appear to have clear views about organising PD or the directions in which it should go. Moreover, there appear to be considerable differences between them about how to proceed.

PD strategies of managers

We can draw three conclusions about the *modus operandi* of managers: firstly, they are most committed to PD when it resolves their own problems or helps to realise their own plans. As indicated by the project names, they use employee PD on an ad hoc basis to address issues for which they feel primarily responsible. Managers feel responsible for the academic progress of students (introduction of new assessment procedures at College A, and CSE at College B) and recognise that the involvement of employees and disciplines is crucial to achieve improvements in this. Projects are set up to have employees contribute solutions to what management identifies as problems.

Secondly, managers are usually the initiators, facilitators, and supporters in learning programmes. They make the contacts and provide the facilities. At College A, they also put strong pressure on teachers to participate in the programme. In the ERK project there, the head of department plays an active role; together with a teacher, she is the driving force. Here, it is perhaps relevant that this particular head of department is also a foreign language teacher, which enables her to contribute more subject knowledge. In the other projects observed, the role of the managers is limited. At College B, managers influence planning via consultative committees, and they stay informed through contacts with teachers. At College C, the manager restricts himself to emphasising the personal responsibility of teachers for their own PD.

Thirdly, managers play a limited role in the creation of employee learning paths. At College A, department heads attempt to stimulate "their" teachers to engage in individual PD activities in informal ways. The managers at College B take a wait-and-see attitude, but react positively to any initiatives. At College C, the managers are relatively passive; they try to stimulate teachers to become self-active in PD.

Creating theory about managers' PD strategies

Managers emphasise their own interests in organising PD. At College A, the emphasis is on creating content-related PD structures and facilitating initiatives from teachers. At College B, managers have a general vision of the importance of PD and encourage initiatives from internal and external bodies and teachers. The manager at College C underscores the importance of PD but has not elaborated the ideas about it in detail. In sum, managers emphasise certain aspects of PD but have developed no integral PD strategies with clear ideas about the direction it should take. Their strategies are neither explicitly developed nor substantial.

At this point, we should note that explicit and integral PD strategies are not always desirable or necessary. Learning-network theory shows how PD structures and PD perspectives (as well as the actors holding them) develop simply through practice. Sometimes, these can be made more explicit and better substantiated. In addition, certain PD issues, such as lack of support from managers in the creation of learning programmes and pathways, lead to tackling specific PD elements.

Our study, and others (e.g., Admiraal-Hilgeman & Geurts, 2011; Lundgren & Poell, 2023; Van Veldhuizen, 2011) reveal that managers have few reasoned views about organising PD and that their opinions are fragmented. They play limited roles in PD, and indeed, it is often unclear just what they contribute to it. The empirical data are not coherent with the visions in the literature, in which their role is described as facilitating (funding, time, access to other actors) and didactic (feedback), and their input as strongly focused on the contribution of PD to improvements in primary work (Kazeminasab et al., 2021; Kessels, 2012; Van Veen et al., 2012).

PD strategies among employees

Many employees engage with PD in a limited fashion; that applies both to participation in projects/learning programmes and to activities they undertake themselves. There is remarkably little interaction with other actors involved in PD (De Laat, 2012; Poekert, 2012). Neither internal nor external colleagues are much involved with PD, and those in leadership positions play modest roles.

Employees undertake activities on an ad hoc basis, which gives them experiences relevant to their professional development. They participate in workshops, study articles and books, and on occasion deliberate with each other about problems. They do not often give systematic thought to the ways in which they do their work or to the possibilities for improving and learning from them. PD is rarely raised in performance interviews.

Hence, employees contribute little direction to PD, and when they do, they do so not explicitly. They make use of opportunities that arise, for instance, through determining global content topics, subject-related topics, preparation for new tasks, or interest in certain topics (cf. Tannenbaum & Wolfson, 2022).

TABLE 16.2 Possibilities for employees to operate strategically in professional development.

<i>Strategic Modus Operandi</i>	<i>Strategic Elements</i>		
	<i>Actors</i>	<i>Experiences</i>	<i>Directing</i>
Passive Participation	Attend meetings	Explicit PD experiences	Hardly any
Selective Participation	Participate with other actors	Exploit experiences offered	Little self-direction or problem solving
Aspect-Based Strategic Operation	Mobilise other actors, form coalitions	Use work experiences/explicit PD experiences	Conscious self-direction via topics and problem solving
Integral, Systematic, Strategic Modus	Approach other actors purposefully	Use experiences purposefully	Purposeful planning

It might be argued that employees operate strategically insofar as they choose only to react to opportunities that present themselves. While we already knew that individual employees can act more or less strategically in creating their learning paths, the findings of this investigation revealed a more detailed picture of the different ways in which employees behave strategically. Table 16.2 distinguishes four ways that emerged from our findings (Poell, 2022).

Passive participation

In this mode, employees take part in the activities offered (workshops, lectures) because they feel social pressure to do so from, for instance, those in leadership positions. The employee's reaction may be, "Who knows, it may be an interesting meeting, and it may benefit me later".

Selective participation

Here, employees participate in the plans of colleagues, those in leadership positions, or external actors, but also develop their own ideas. For instance, they participate in courses and education programmes, but pay less attention to certain parts; that is, they participate selectively. Educators often interpret this as a lack of motivation or effort, but it is a way of operating strategically: the employees use only those elements they find relevant.

Aspect-based strategic operation

In this mode, an employee has an idea about PD which they can concretise by developing topics for a learning path, mobilising other actors, or by gaining certain

experiences. In these processes, they can take measures to influence elements of PD – by involving a certain colleague or enrolling in a certain course. This may have subsequent positive effects on the learning path, but that is not known for certain in advance. This way of operating strategically is expected to occur particularly among employees whose ideas PD are not comprehensive.

Employees can try to mobilise PD support from managers and other actors. The latter are important not only for their skills but also because they have a certain authority or have access to other actors and additional facilities at their disposal, including influence over budgetary allocations.

Another significant strategic option is the creation and use of certain experiences. Many employees emphasise courses and training sessions. These forms of PD may be suitable, for instance, for someone who is building up a portfolio of PD activities.

Integral, systematic, and strategic modus operandi. In this mode, employees can develop comprehensive strategic plans and use them in the creation of a learning path. In the development of such a plan, they are led by their own vision of PD and how it should be addressed in the existing context. In the case of an integral strategic modus operandi, employees include different but coherent elements of the learning path and work consciously on PD. However, this is not feasible for many employees, and experiences with personal development plans indicate this (Beusaert et al., 2012; Greenan, 2016; Janssen, 2013).

In practice, these four forms of strategic operating cannot be distinguished precisely; they overlap and vary in the extent to which they are explicit. These variations make it clear that employees act in different ways, according to their own views and skills, thereby dealing with PD structures and other actors in their own distinct ways.

An important question remains: how do those in leadership positions react to such actions by employees? Future studies might investigate the extent to which managers consider personal responsibilities and interests when organising PD activities, while bearing in mind the modus operandi and visions of employees. Do leaders recognise the purposes that employees attribute to PD, and do they take into consideration those elements in the PD structure that employees find relevant? Finally, since our case studies were conducted in schools only, follow-up research might profitably focus on other types of organisations, where employees have different power relationships with their managers. Conclusions from our school sample cannot be generalised to such organisations without further research.

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PART V



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17

COLLABORATIVELY RESEARCHING ADULT LEARNING

An Epilogue

*Katrin Kraus, Victoria J. Marsick, Michael Bernhard,
Stephen Billett, Christiane Hof, and Peter H. Sawchuk*

Reflecting on the Process and Value of Cooperation

With the transition from modernity to late “liquid modernity”, it has become clear that personally worthwhile and societally significant learning arises from beyond what happens within schools, universities, or adult education institutions, or what occurs in individuals’ minds alone. Learning is a phenomenon that occurs through the complex interactions between individuals and their society in various ways. The aim of this volume is to approach and appraise this learning from a perspective that accommodates and acknowledges the range of ways in which adults learn and develop through their engagements with their (changing) social environments. Working on this task, the focus is on the nexus of life course, work, and transitions. That implies firstly that learning – both in and beyond formal settings – is seen as a phenomenon arising throughout the lifetime and, secondly, especially for adults, that many of the learning processes are related to paid and unpaid work and working life. Thirdly, transitions involve learning related to movements, whether in the context of societal transformation, workplace changes, individual career development, and life circumstances and phases. Having set this focus, the subject of understanding learning in liquid modernity still is the broad and ambitious aim of this volume.

To respond to that challenge, the editorship and authorship of this volume have been using the principle of “diverse teams of work” (Gardenswartz & Rowe, 2008). That principle explicitly values the diversity of adults in fulfilling tasks as they all contribute different strengths to the process and the achievement of collective goals. For an academic project such as this volume, this principle is especially salient considering the diverse intellectual fields of the authors, who contribute their various perspectives, knowledge, theoretical positions, and

academic experiences to this book. The diversity of contributors helped tackle the intricate and complex subject of learning at the nexus of life course, work, and transitions.

The editors come from three different continents – North America, Australia, and Europe – and five different countries. Although scholars from South America, Africa, and Asia are absent, the perspectives informing this volume remain broad and encompass diverse regions of the world. It would be worth expanding this dimension of diversity in future projects addressing nonformal education and learning through and at work by including editors from other parts of the globe. For this volume, the diversity of editorship contributed to understanding adult learning during the ongoing transformation of industrialised societies, which are experiencing fundamental shifts in their core identity – namely, from modern industrial mass production to late-modern digital exploration and invention – and, consequently, in the organisation and negotiations of life courses and learning within social institutions (Kohli, 2007).

The authors of this volume also hail from a range of generations. This brings two important aspects that add to its valuable diversity. Members of the same generation may share meaningful experiences, mainly due to their age and the eras they live through. It may make a difference for analysing today's changing times whether the contributors more or less grew up during this period of change, definitely taking place since the turn of the millennium, or if their life experiences extend back to the second half of the 20th century. Each of these different periods of time is associated with a different personal experience of stability and change, and associated expectations, and a different personal experience with these times and their changes, which are the subject of the collective intellectual efforts in this book. The perspective on this change differs among individuals, causing views about and a privileging of specific aspects and posing different questions. Moreover, the contributors hold different academic positions and have faced and continue to face person-particular forms of transitions themselves. Some are at the beginning of their careers, exploring new research fields, while others have years of expertise and have contributed substantially to their established fields of research. Recognising these diverse perspectives potentially enriches our understanding of learning of adults at the nexus of life course, work, and transitions in times of change.

So, although the contributors share a common focus on adult education and learning, they are affiliated with different academic disciplines, have diverse intentionalities, and pursue various scholarly trajectories. These merely reflect that learning at the nexus of the life course, work, and transitions relates to multifaceted questions of learning and adult education, as most authors are connected to this field. Trying to understand adult learning and education involves considering aspects of education, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and economics, as reflected in this volume.

Opportunities and Challenges for Future Research, Practice, and Policy

Societies are undergoing fundamental shifts – specifically, from modern industrial mass production to late-modern digital exploration and invention – and consequently in the organisation of life courses and learning within and without social institutions (Kohli, 2007). This shift is primarily characterised by a fracturing of the formerly perceived stable unity of many aspects of adults’ lives. Climate change and socio-economic and political turmoil have contributed to disruption and migration accompanied by displacement and frequent readjustments – physical, emotional, psychological, cultural, and social – that affect multiple aspects of identity as individuals confront, adjust to, or transform how they live, socialise, and work.

The nexus of life, work, and learning under these conditions cannot be captured by periodic snapshots alone. Reality is dynamic, and thus learning strategies must also adjust and shift. While individuals learn, they do so in social contexts and relationally linked to other people. Learners may cross boundaries into other communities and institutional actors at the micro, meso, and macro levels. Adults’ futures are increasingly difficult to imagine, given the complex, rapidly changing world. Various frameworks are introduced in this volume to capture how adults make sense of their lives within and across transitions. This situation leads to relevant questions. What are some of the knowledge gaps that research can help to fill going forward? What implications do new ways to understand learning hold for policy and practice, and how do policy and practice conversely shape lifelong learning especially in relationship to work? It is these questions that are addressed if not answered within this volume.

Implications for research

Adults, like all other individuals, exercise their agency in dynamic interplay with social affordances, norms, practices, regimes, and power dynamics. Thus, a key focus for future research might be to explore the interconnections between learning in formal and informal educational contexts across the life course and during life transitions and expand an understanding of what constitutes educational contexts and educative experiences. Some questions that arise include:

- What impact do societal, political, economic, and environmental changes have on adult and workplace learning processes and practices?
- What does human agency look like in relational contexts, and how is it changing in a rapidly changing world?
- What insights into the relationality of learning can be gained by adopting a posthuman perspective that views persons as relational assemblages – entangled with technologies, nonhuman animals, materialities, and ecological systems – and that challenges human exceptionalism and self-centred individualism (Braidotti, 2013)?

- How are adults finding ways to cross boundaries and translate ideas from one context or community to another? What gets lost in translation?
- In what ways, if at all, are recognition and mis-recognition addressed in transitions?

Research is needed to understand how people best learn to adapt to and in turn shape the new circumstances as they find themselves negotiating everyday practices as they participate in work, community, or educational studies activities. In addition, the role played by semi-structured experiences, and/or by learning facilitators in frequent collaboration with intelligent technology, is becoming increasingly important. Adults often learn through observation, but increasingly, the knowledge they seek becomes more opaque and less easy to access without experts who offer coaching, modelling, or problem-solving consultation even when solutions are not ready at hand. Learning in work settings has become more legitimised – often taking place in the workflow – alongside learning through classroom-based experiences. As the acceptance of workplace learning of this kind has grown, so too have executives, managers, and colleagues necessarily become involved in organising and supporting this learning. What prepares these individuals to support learning well? What liminal spaces arise within or adjacent to real work for learning amid action, or through learning-based work, to learn before new action can be taken? If the circumstances and processes of learning are to be perceived more broadly and inclusively, then there is a need to visit these spaces to observe learning and reconstruct the conditions under which it occurs, as well as explore how liminal spaces (Marsick et al., 2026) for learning develop and its barriers and challenges.

It follows then that current and future research activities need to broaden understandings about how learning arises in the diverse kinds of social and work contexts in which adults participate. That research needs to appraise integrated theoretical framings that can illuminate and elaborate the contributions to that learning from personal agency, the socio-/material-economic conditions, and relations between them in processes of adult learning and development. A few examples of such frameworks to be tested can be found in Kraus (2026) and Poell et al. (2026). Kraus notes the absence of integrative approach that defines the relationships between work and learning from the perspective of learning, and created a framework to close this gap. She theorised different modes of learning in the relationship to work when it is organised versus situated, and when it is oriented to specific skills/knowledge versus incorporated agency. Poell, Falk, and Van der Krogt alternatively develop learning network theory to chart individual learning paths that link work demands with lifelong learning interests. However, they also note that organisations do not necessarily build on these naturally occurring resources. Could further research help to find synergies that reconcile differing and possibly competing learning strategies? What other frameworks might be tested through research to widen the lens when deepening insight into learning processes?

Finally, these research efforts may need to develop new methodological tools to better capture learning at the nexus of life course, work, and transitions. This volume offers some promising examples. Biographical and life history research is widely used to provide detailed life experience examples of transition that offer insight into learning for many different transitions related to the nexus of life and work. Contributors discuss a range of methodological approaches that may not be widely known or used, such as the psycho-societal approach (Salling Olesen, 2026) to examine the dialectical intersection between societal transformation and the subjective dynamics of individual lives originating from critical educational research. Language considerations in research studies that cross cultural boundaries raise further questions of methodology as illustrated in cross-community research (Dinkelaker, 2026), transnational research (Niemeyer, 2026), and use of distinct, but related, concepts from different cultures, countries, and times (Billett et al., 2026). Comparative studies are needed across different cultural, economic, and policy environments to identify transferable insights.

Researchers can potentially open new territory for learning at the nexus by also drawing on AI, machine learning algorithms, and natural language processing (NLP) techniques. Sentiment analysis – also known as opinion mining – for example categorises text as positive, negative, or neutral. It converts qualitative data (text) into quantifiable metrics, enabling insights into trends and patterns based on opinions. Could sentiment analysis be used to examine perceptions of liminal spaces vis-à-vis both access to opportunities versus negative reactions to risks involved when rules of engagement are set aside? Researchers have already adopted digital visualisation and modelling tools for revealing and mapping naturally occurring or intervention-based changes that experiment with new directions in work and learning under conditions of complexity. Coleman et al. (2017), for example, described how they used visualisation tools to “capture the multiple sources and temporal dynamics of complex, embedded problems . . . [and also] identify central nodes and patterns [on a 3D attractor landscape plot] that may be unrecognizable by other means” (p. 198). How might these visualising and modelling tools be useful in mapping ways that learning unfolds in different contexts?

Implications for practice and policy

Practice and policy need to work hand in hand to identify and best inform, guide, and support the kinds of learning advocated in this volume. They are two sides of the same coin. Policy sets the terms and conditions for access and learning opportunities while simultaneously creating constraints and guidelines that, in turn, affect how practice unfolds. Pendleton-Jullian and Brown (2018) illustrate ways that interventions – which policies effect – benefit from iterative cycles of experimentation that use probes and feedback loops to adjust and build innovation over time. How could the situated learning of people affected by policies related to

work practices be more effectively cultivated through a closer ongoing relationship between policy and practice?

Examples in this volume of areas ripe for such experimentation are described by Bernhard (2026) with respect to immigration and by Harteis (2026) with respect to the changing landscape of human collaboration with technology. In the immigration example, Bernhard (2026) examines regimes – networks of rules, norms, and procedures – imposed by policies requiring qualifications demonstrating prior Canadian work experience. Newly arrived immigrants learn to craft workarounds shaped by the interaction of external affordances and personal capacities. How could these creative responses be better tracked and fed back into policy to take advantage of practice gains? In the technology example, Harteis (2026) notes constraints to workplace learning in digital environments and seeks ways to help workers gain or maintain control and self-direction in addressing digital disruption. The balance between bottom-up learning autonomy and organisational direction of learning is important because complex adaptive systems adapt to rapid change almost unconsciously at grass-roots levels. He also identifies the need for external policy to support learners overwhelmed by new digital practices as they gain new skills as a cautionary measure. These examples raise questions as to what agency looks like under different conditions and circumstances. Policy and practice in the contemporary rapidly changing environment might also benefit from closer collaboration when monitoring implementation in practice to better track learning and its outcomes and using this to adjust policy. Feedback loops could be created to heighten awareness of unintended and emergent outcomes that can ground both policy and practice.

Societally oriented policies can also be used to send signals about the value of learning throughout the lifespan, for example, by:

- recognising and funding learning beyond formal education, including learning in the workplace, in community, and in everyday life
- supporting lifelong education pathways that accommodate life course transitions
- integrating adult learning strategies into broader responses to societal, political, economic, and environmental challenges
- encouraging cross-sector collaboration among education providers, employers, and policy makers
- incentivising the creation of insurance systems that employees can draw upon to fund periodic continuing education skills building

Policy is further implemented in institutions that are meso-level and even micro-level through guidelines and practice routines. Practices that support situated and lifelong learning of the kind discussed in this volume can arise organically and then spread almost virally as their value is recognised. For instance, Gherardi's (2009) concept of the practices of communities has provided a fresh way of understanding how work activities and workers' participation in them

progress. Then, technologically assisted processes, such as video-reflective ethnographies, have provided new insights to learning processes in those settings (Aijawi et al., 2020). An example is the increasing adaptation of Agile methods and practices – even though Agile’s success requires organisation-wide changes that adopting companies cannot always put in place (Sleeve, 2021). Practices can also be intentionally developed by workplaces and educational institutions that remove barriers and increase supports for learning at the nexus of life and work. These might start with the design of learning programmes that bridge formal, informal, and non-formal physical and social contexts. Additionally, personalised learning supports – tutoring, mentoring, and coaching, for example – can be offered that are adaptable to the iterative nature of learning across work-life trajectories. As well, programmes could use flexible, modular approaches to adult education that acknowledge and are responsive to the demands that adults are facing through their work, family, and community commitments in responding to the learning required within rapidly changing social and work environments.

The goals of and practices within educational institutions and workplaces can perhaps be better aligned with governmental imperatives and societal exigencies to recognise and support lifelong learning throughout the life span. This may require rethinking long-held policies that underpin social values and agreements regarding orthodox approaches, such as taught programmes of continuing education and training. For example, companies shifting their learning policies from mandated top-down training to self-directed learning that employees are expected to engage in and for which they are held accountable might well be increased. Many organisations might make this claim because their focus is knowledge work, but reciprocally, they need to afford opportunities for workers learning to be commensurate with these imperatives. They might hire educated professionals who naturally seek to continue building their knowledge and provide assistance for those in the workforce to sustain their employability in times of change. However, not all employees benefitted from education that taught learning-to-learn skills. For various reasons, such workers neither have the skills nor the discretion in their work practices to engage independently in cycles of experimentation and learning. Organisations and educational institutions, however, can find ways to help these adults develop needed capacities and provide opportunities in-house for mentoring, coaching, and apprenticeships that begin to address this imbalance.

Reviewing recent societal developments draws attention to what is now being more fully considered in the context of work and learning, the ageing population. This is leading to longer working lives and an extended duration of remaining employable. Added here is the effective transition to retirement after long working lives as a focus of politics and practice as well as of research. At the societal level, countries may have mandatory retirement ages and work restrictions that were undertaken for societal imperatives, for example, a lengthy and quality period of

life after decades of work, to ensure turnover and availability of jobs for younger employees. However, such practices may also lead to a loss of valuable knowledge acquired through years of experience when there are few, if any, options for retired employees to pass on what they know to next generations. Non-profit organisations sometimes fill this gap with opportunities to match mentors (often volunteers) with those seeking knowledge and expertise. However, these are often ad hoc solutions that are limited in scope. Likewise, for various reasons, young people aspiring to find work find it challenging to break into labour markets and acquire learning from experience. At an organisational level, employers could take responsibility for organising such a learning process in the context of retirement as a major transition in working life. Could policies and practices be enacted that address misalignments such as these? And could research give insights into how learning takes place in this context and how experience can be passed on in the working context?

The different life experiences shared and analysed in this volume depict practices to compensate or work around barriers encountered in seeking meaningful work and learning for career advancement and life transitions. Transformative and generative learning (Lim & Nicolaides, 2024) may be needed to imagine what it would be like if those who shape and support learning of the kind described in this volume could question existing practices that do not value and acknowledge adults' biographical resources and capacities. Educators may themselves need help in making this shift to recognise prior work and learning experiences as a valuable source of learning along with scholarly publications and theories, and to build examples and insights from practice into learning and coursework.

Conclusion: Learning-Based Research, Policy, and Practice

Marsick et al. (2026) point out that complex and dynamic work requires not only work-based learning but also learning-based work, and this is also true for researching work and learning in changing times. To address in a systematic way the issues presented here as topics for further research, there is a need not only for research but also for approaches to research that are driven by curiosity and mutual learning in diverse collaborations – across countries and continents, generations, cultural backgrounds, academic disciplines, and traditions. In short, understanding how people develop in relation to their (changing) social environments demands collaborative and learning-based research. What is true about learning in late modernity – that individuals learn within social contexts and are relationally linked to others – is also true for researching learning in late modernity: academics researching adult learning in changing times should be aware of their own social contexts and be relationally connected to other scholars. To complete the picture, policies and practice that are geared towards enabling individual learning in a rapidly changing world

of work, as presented in this volume, cannot simply implement predetermined plans, but must themselves be capable of learning and constantly developing new approaches.

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