Individualising the social - socialising the individual: Interdependence between social and individual agency in vocational learning.

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Individualising the social - socialising the individual: 
Interdependence between social and individual agency 
in vocational learning

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Abstract
A greater acknowledgment of the interdependence between individual and social agency is warranted within current conceptions of learning, and policy and practice within adult and vocational education. Currently, some accounts of learning tend to overly privilege situational agency to the detriment of the negotiated contributions arising between more broadly conceptualised accounts of individual and social agency. As they fail to fully acknowledge the accumulative outcome of interaction between the cognitive and social experience that shapes human cognition ontogenetically and remakes culture, these theories remain incomplete and unsatisfactory. In a different way, social agency is also overly privileged in current conceptions of vocations, vocational education and its policy and practice within Australia. A consideration of individual intentionality and agency and its interdependence with social and historical contributions is proposed to balance views that privilege particular social influences in current conceptions of vocational practice and its development.

Introduction
Understanding the interdependence between individuals’ learning and social and cultural contributions to that learning is an enduring and contested project within psychological thought, as it is within sociology and philosophy. My interest in this interdependence has its origins in the cognitive representations of knowledge of hairdressers engaged in the same workplaces. Their knowledge representations yielded a legacy of workplace norms, practices and values which were identified as shaping how they conducted their work. However, contributions beyond the particular workplace were also identified as shaping individuals’ vocational practice thereby influencing how they practiced and learnt through their work. More than being merely idiosyncratic, the geneses of these hairdressers’ conceptions of and intentionality about practice were linked with events in their life histories. Therefore, outside of particular situational influences, albeit with their cultural and historical heritage, the accumulation of broader social and cultural influences appear to shape individuals’ construction of knowledge ontogenetically – throughout their life histories (Billett, 2003). So, beyond the immediate social experience, premediate experiences – those occurring earlier - need to be accounted for in considering the broader and negotiated social geneses of individuals’ cognition which shape their postmediate experiences and practices, those encountered beyond some particular experience. This suggests a more comprehensive account of the social basis of learning is required than one strongly privileging situational contributions, such as in communities of practice, activity systems, and distributed cognition. The geneses and exercise of individuals’ agency and intentionality - their agentic action - and its interaction with the social world are proposed as needing, once more, to be brought to the foreground in order for their independence with social world to be understood.

This proposition invites consideration of the interdependences between how individuals’ personal histories or ontogenies shape their participation and learning in social practices (e.g. vocational courses, workplaces). It also confronts the issue of whether individuals can affect substantial cognitive change on their own, or whether this is only possible with changes in social institutions and practice (Ratner, 2000). This is
central to understanding how society and culture are remade and transformed, and whether individuals are active participants and initiators in this remaking or are merely subject to those changes. This issue is salient to understanding the learning of vocational practice, with its dimensions of tried-and-true practices, yet with the need for practitioners to engage with, develop and deploy their vocational practice in changing circumstances.

Here, learning is proposed as a reciprocal and interdependent inter-psychological process -- between the individual and social sources -- that cannot be fully understood without a consideration of individual agency, identity, subjectivity and intentionality, and their geneses. Bridging and attempting some reconciliation across diverse views about human agency requires reconstituting individuals as being uniquely socially shaped through distinct combinations of social experiences that constitutes their life histories or ontogenies (Billett 1998). There is nothing particularly novel about such propositions, except one’s consideration of it. They have been well articulated and much earlier (e.g. Baldwin, 1930; Meade, 1934). However, these propositions are worthy of being rehearsed at a time when situational agency is being privileged in current theories of learning and when social influences of particularly strong kinds are shaping policy formulations within vocational education.

If this paper seeks to be corrective, it is through proposing: (a) individual experience and agency as having complex social geneses within individuals’ ontogenies; (b) a more social conception of the individual; and (c) a relational interdependence between the socially constructed individual and the immediate social world in cognition, and ontogenetic development and the remaking of culture.

**Individual agency and human cognition**

Through interpretation, if not always in conception, there is an over emphasis on immediate social contributions to cognition in current theorising. There is a need to place the individual once more in the foreground of conceptions of learning. There is no space here to elaborate particular situated qualities of distributed cognition, activity systems and communities of practice. However, in brief, distributed cognition is bound to particular social systems (Salomon, 1997); activity systems comprise pre-specified components of particular social practice (Engestrom, 1993); and communities of practice are bounded by their practices and relations (Wenger, 1998). That is, each account is bonded to particular situations. As such they are useful for describing, understanding and investigating particular social practice, and, in some ways, individuals’ relations to those practices. Yet, they may fail to account for how individuals elect to engage with immediate influences or provide bases for understanding the influences of the premediate experience on that engagement, thereby risking situational determinism. For instance, distributed theories of cognition have proposed that the individual is but one element in a social system that shapes human cognition (Pea, Hutchins). Yet, others suggest that individuals are not so enmeshed in social systems. Cobb (1998) and Salomon (1997) have both argued that individuals have a greater independence than this frameworks suggests. They propose learning as a negotiated process, residing in the interaction between the cognitive and social experience. The cultural psychologist Valsiner (2000) goes further referring to the uniqueness of individuals’ experience – the bases by which individuals make sense of and reproduce the world --is central to human cognition. He refers to each experience, even the most mundane, as being in some way unique and special to the individual.

The social experience is what individuals encounter yet it is unlikely to be available uniformly. Therefore, its influence will be, at best, partial for some. Even if the
degree of individuals’ engagement could somehow be the same, individuals’ construction of knowledge would not be uniform, because individuals actively appropriate knowledge, in ways shaped by their ontogenetically derived values and subjectivities, and as exercised by their agency. However, the social and cognitive experiences represent interdependent dimensions – that are not dualistic. Understanding how individual agency shapes this process seems important for at least three reasons: (i) individuals’ cognition develops ontogenetically, (ii) as does their learning; and (iii) it is in interactions between the social and the individual through which culture (society if you like) is remade and transformed. So individual intentionality and agency will influence these processes.

Firstly and secondly, in anthropological and socio-cultural accounts of learning, individuals’ participation in social practice is associated with learning. Lave (1993) suggests that wherever you encounter practice, you also identify learning. Rogoff (1995) has emphasised the central role of participation in learning. Across these theories, and consistent with cognitive views (e.g. Anderson, 1993), the consequences of individuals’ engagement in goal-directed activities is more than achieving those activities’ goals, it also has a cognitive legacy (Anzai & Simon, 1979; Newell & Simon, 1972). Both the Vygotskian and the Piagetian constructivist perspectives, propose that whenever we deploy our cognitive resources when engaging in tasks and interactions, cognitive change occurs (Billett, 1996). These and cognitive theories suggest that the scope of change is likely to be influenced by the novelty of the activity to individuals and the degree of effort they elect to engage in when undertaking activity (Newell & Simon, 1972). The kind of impasse or perturbation that constitutes individuals’ responses shapes the kind and extent of cognitive change (Van Lehn, 1998). That is, the construction of the impasses and responses are person-dependent. Moreover, individuals decide which problems they engage in and with what degree of engagement (Goodnow, 1990). Therefore, the kinds of activities that individuals engage in throughout their lives, and the degree by which they elect to engage with tasks are some bases by which participation and learning are linked ontogenetically. To understand individuals’ role and their agentic action in this process it is worth considering the inter-psychological processes of appropriation and inter-subjectivity.

Appropriation refers to individuals ‘making their own’ what they encounter in a social world (Leontyev, 1981). Appropriation is often viewed as desirable form of change because it reflects what is important to individuals as well as what is privileged by social practices. Following Leontyev (1981), Wertsch (1998) distinguishes appropriation from mastery. Individuals wholeheartedly accept appropriation, while mastery is reluctantly and superficially learnt and practised only under social monitoring. Compare the engagement of the enthusiast, with the reluctance of the conscript. Yet, individuals may well appropriate knowledge that is inappropriate, short-term, or just plain wrong (e.g. dangerous work practices. Somerville and Bernoth (2001) found that, in different ways, both coalminers and aged care workers came to accept workplace injury as part of their occupational identity. Conversely, individuals might elect to only master knowledge that is important (e.g. being fair, precise, careful). Similarly, intersubjectivity or shared understanding is viewed as a negotiated outcome of interpersonal interactions, making accessible, comparable and shared individuals’ ontogenetically-derived learning (Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989). So these processes and their outcomes (both their weaknesses and strengths) need to be seen in terms of something in which individuals can play an active role. It is not simply about socialisation. Individuals selecting options from shape these inter-psychological processes and transform what is encountered in ways influenced by their histories and
agency. The question is the degree by which this agency has a social genesis. This is taken up later in the paper.

Thirdly, beyond proposing how individuals’ change or learning occurs, the negotiated process of appropriation is also seen as the means through which culture is transmitted and transformed (Rogoff, 1990). Appropriation is held to build the bridge between the historical heritage of human beings and how each new generation takeover that heritage (Leonteyev 1981). So beyond merely selecting and making choices, the “active role of appropriation presents the learner as a constructor of new choices, not constrained to those in immediate circumstances.” (Valsiner 1998 114) This suggests that, rather than being constrained by the immediate social experience, individuals are capable of initiating and formulating their own change and development. Individuals transform culture as they appropriate practice and carry it forward to the next generation in an altered form (Rogoff 1990). Rogoff proposes that individuals’ creativity builds upon technological transformation and occurs through engagement in and with the resolution of problems that is being addressed. It follows that vocational practice, is not merely reproduced it is elaborated, defined and transformed by individuals (remade) as their agency and intentionality interacts with what they encounter. Importantly, it suggests that culture is reproduced, not through behavioural-like social determinism, but in a complex dialogue between each generation of individuals and the social world as meanings are negotiated (e.g. Bhaskar, 1998; Gergen, 1994) and as these meanings change through their life histories.

Therefore, it can be claimed that socially generated knowledge and cultural practice has as its vanguard individuals’ collectively and accumulatively confronting new problems at particular moments in their life histories and at particular points in the history of our species (i.e. phylogenetic development). How individuals elect to remake the cultural construction of concepts is of necessity, in part, a product of their agency and intentionality. For instance, within Australian vocational education, Seddon (1999) found that teachers and administrators transformed their roles in response to the changing conditions (i.e. the marketisation of VET) and new accountabilities. More than merely selecting from available options, they created new roles. In this case, individuals’ agentic actions in generating change were enmeshed in changing cultural practices. Yet, this does not deny their role in transforming these practices. To use Dilthey’s terms, rather than situational determinism these experience reflect individuals taking a ‘seat in life’ (Sitz im Leben). Without a consideration of individual agency and intentionality, theories of learning privileging situational factors may well fail to account for how individuals elect to engage in particular situations and the interdependency between the social and cognitive experience. Those proposing a strong role for social agency, of course may reject this view, claiming that such autonomy is illusory.

**Individual and the social**

An inherent quality of knowledge with cultural and social geneses is its location in the past. This is a great strength, as it reflects proven practices that have evolved over time as new demands emerge and technologies change. This kind of historically derived knowledge constitutes the occupational knowledge upon which vocational education often focuses. However, such socially sourced knowledge may have limitations in addressing new situations or circumstances. This was Dewey’s criticism of the highly reproductive model of Russian education system that had existed since Catherine the Great and was then being reified in Soviet Russia (Valsiner, 1988). Dewey proposed that, rather than being just socially reproductive, education also needed to be responsive to new circumstances and requirements, be generative of fresh insights and individuals’
contribution, and be tolerant of divergences (Glassman, 2001). Cole, a principal advocate of cultural historical activity theory, shares these concerns suggesting that individual agency stands as a necessary prerequisite for the successful deployment of historically-derived knowledge particularly to novel circumstances. Cole (2002) recently commented being unable to advise his teacher education students on how they might best survive and practice teaching in contemporary American high schools. In doing so, he conceded that the historically derived and culturally constituted classroom management concepts and practices would fail these novice teachers. Instead, these teachers’ personal agency and capacities will largely determine their success in developing and negotiating classroom practices; thereby remaking what constitutes teaching practice. Cole has been quite consistent with this view. Two decades earlier, he and Griffin (1980) reached a similar conclusion about literacy. Salomon (1997) summarises their conclusion "that while some cultural artefacts, such as those related to literacy, may have some cognitive residues, these residues are in fact quite modest in comparison with the changes brought about in the way people function when literate." (p.126) So the potency of socially-generated knowledge, such as literacy, is premised in part on individuals’ capacities and agency. Vygotsky also concluded that social guidance is secondary to individual agency in the development of psychological functions. In referring to child’s play, he noted that

"In play the child is always higher than his [sic] average age, higher than his usual everyday behaviour; he is in play as if a head above himself. The play contains, in a condensed way, as if in the focus of a magnifying glass, all tendencies of development; it is as if the child in play tries to accomplish a jump above the level of his ordinary behaviour. ... Play is the resource of development and it creates the zone of nearest development. Action in the imaginary field, in the imagined situation, construction of voluntary intention, the formulation of life plan, will motivates -- this all emerges in play." (Vygotsky 1966: 74-75 cited in Valsiner, 2000)

Here, Vygotsky also refers to the importance of activities that have social and cultural geneses (e.g. play) and individuals’ intentionality in their engagement in their zone of potential development in engaging in those activities. For Baldwin (1930), a key element of the development of the kind that Vygotsky referred to is the “conscious and social accommodations, imitation, invention and volition ...(p. 4). He proposed an interplay between the social practice and individuals’ intentional task formation. Yet, imitation is exercised in particular and intentional ways.

Within sociology and philosophy, the relations between structure and agency is well exercised. Both have accounts that are highly structured in which individual agency is seen as illusory (e.g. Foucalt, Bourdieu), accounts that grant individual autonomy (e.g. Goffman, Rousseau) and those that acknowledge interaction between the two (e.g. Giddens, Bhaskar, Berger and Luckman). Highly structured views, such as Foucalt’s render individuals as mere placeholders in social networks (Mansfield, 2000) because there are so enmeshed in the social structures in ways that diminishes their personal autonomy. Bourdieu (1991) refers to as the socially constraining nature of individual action, citing how social practice determines individuals’ dialects. Similarly, Foucalt (1979) suggest individuals are subject to pervasive social press and ‘placed under’ all subjected to the influence of the norms and practices encountered throughout the life histories - the premediate experience. So, in these views, individuals’ subjectivities determine their behaviour and cognition (Davies, 2000). Others suggest that ultimately individuals are less constrained by these structures (e.g. Rousseau, 1968). Yet, others still see structure as being more enabling than constraining. For instance, Giddens (1984)
proposes a key role for human agency in the social structuring of knowledge through his concept of structuration. Through acknowledging intersections and interactions (interdependence) between social structures he links individual intentionality and their subjectivity. Reflecting the Piagetian concept of disequilibrium, Giddens (1991) suggests the problem for the self is in maintaining its security in a culture that threatens its stability and the reference points for its stability. Yet, as Fenwick (1998) proposes that while permitting a role for individuals, this view positions them as anxiety ridden and their agency restricted to reflexive relations with culture.

Of course, championing individual agency within discourses that privilege social agency brings risks of being refuted and misinterpreted. Dewey’s work was expunged from the Soviet education system after he criticised its emphasis on social reproduction (Glassman, 2001). Valsiner has been accused of treachery in proposing a key role for the individual within cultural psychology. Ratner (2000) holds that Valsiner’s assertion that culture is a set of suggestions that individuals can freely accept, reject or modify as they wish and his replacing socio-historical psychology with co-constructionism is undermining cultural psychology as a corrective to earlier and highly individualised psychological views. Perhaps more importantly, Ratner claims that this more individualistic perspective fails to account for the contributions of the broader social context. Therefore, having considered the role of human agency in cognition, and the need for social theories of learning to acknowledge this agency, it is appropriate to consider the relations between the social and individual.

The relations between the individual and the social world

The key purpose of bringing the individual to the foreground is to consider the interdependence between the individual and the social. As noted, psychology, sociology and philosophy all provide accounts that either privilege social or individual agency. For instance, Cartesian dualism is seen as proposing a separation between body and the mind. Its demise has been heralded as the basis for reconciling the human mind with the social world (e.g. Scribner, 1997/1990) or that ‘beyond the skin’ as some prefer (e.g. Hutchins, 1991; Wertsch, 1991). However, Descartes’ ultimate position is quite distinct from Cartesian orthodoxy. In his last work, *Passion in the Soul* (1649), he claimed a substantial union and interaction between the mind and the world beyond. Significantly, he saw human passion as a key link between the mind and behaviour, thereby linking external world to the mind. Passions are used deliberately to account for influences outside of the body beyond physiological responses (i.e. pain, hunger) (Copleston, 1994; Haldane & Ross, 1971). This sentiment helps bridge a highly socially subjective view with a more individualistic view. Moreover, beatitude for Descartes was associated with “tranquillity or contentment of soul tenable in this life by one's own efforts” (Copleston, 1994). The self in action with the world constitutes this desirable state. So Similarly, Schopenhauer (1883 cited in Cottingham 1996) also referred to human will as means by which the mind is linked to the external world. Descartes and Schopenhauer came to emphasise what in contemporary terms is described as human intentionality as a means of proposing human goals, and used it to bridge the cognitive and the social experience.

So how should we consider the relations between the social and individual? Scribner (Scribner, 1997/1990) suggested that, having overturned Cartesian dualism, the task for psychology is to understand the relations between the social and behaviour. She asserted that these relations are irreducible, claiming that to separate the two was akin to attempting to separate the sodium and chlorine and still retain its saltiness (Martin & Scribner, 1991). Rogoff (1990) also refers to the inseparability of individuals’ efforts, social interests and cultural milieu. Finding a pathway between social determinism and
highly individualistic accounts is important in understanding their relationship (Miller & Goodnow, 1995). Yet accounts such as situated cognition (including one's own (Billett, 2001)), distributed cognition, activity systems, communities of practice run the risk of privileging situational determinism, at a cost to considerations of individual agency and broader social and cultural influences. Just as behaviourism denied human consciousness (Taylor, 1985), accounts that emphasise situational determinism run the risk of denying human intentionality and agency.

Valsiner (1994) presses for a consideration of the relatedness between individuals’ interests and goals, and the processes and goals of the social practice, which shapes how individuals elect to participate and engage in inter-psychological processes. He holds relatedness ranges from total involvement to being quite disengaged from it. Similarly, the sociologists Berger and Luckman propose “socialisation is never completely successful. Some individuals inhabit the transmitted universe more definitely than others. Even among the more or less accredited inhabitants, there will be idiosyncratic variations in the way they conceive the universe” (Berger & Luckman, 1966 .p.24.) Yet, what is proposed as idiosyncratic by these authors is seen here as being the product of personal histories. The idea of relationships, rather than interdependencies, shape concepts of learning through communities of practice, for instance, which have become popularised, as has the idea that they are somehow benign, inclusive and conducive of intersubjectivity -- shared understanding, rather than being contested, as was proposed in (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Participation and learning in social practices such as workplaces, community activities and education institutions alike can be seen as being founded on the relatedness between the affordances of the social practice and how individuals elect to engage in a social practice. Their interdependency or their relatedness are founded on the negotiations between two sets of continuities. Firstly, the social practice likely affords opportunities in ways directed towards securing its continuity and development or those of interests and within it. Workplaces, educational institutions and community groupings will provide opportunities directed towards advancing their goals and practices or interests within them (Billett, 2002a, 2002b). However, individuals’ participation in social practice is mediated by their intentions for continuity and development, albeit shaped by more general concerns about cultural or occupational identity (Billett, Barker, & Hernon-Tinning, in press). These qualities influence individuals’ participation in their work practice (Somerville, 2002; Somerville & Bernoth, 2001) and shape how they direct their agentic actions. The interplay between these two sets of continuities and the degree their consonance or contestation underpin the relations that also constitute the parameters for its remaking. So an instance of social practice, such as a vocational classroom or college or workplace, has to be understood in terms that include the interests, identities and subjectivities of its participants and their active role in its remaking. This reciprocity and dialogicity is inherent in the process of meaning making and construction of knowledge. Newman et al. (1989) claim that Vygotsky’s greatest contribution was not in linking the external and internal, but in emphasising the dialectic between the inter- and intra-psychological. Similarly, Suchman (1997)) in considering human-machine interactions suggests.

“The point is not to have the price of recognizing the agency of artefacts be the denial of our own. Agency - and associated accountabilities - reside neither in us or in or in our artefacts, but in our inter-actions.”

Valsiner's (1994) concept of the co-construction of knowledge emphasises the interaction between the cognitive and social experience. For Valsiner, appropriation emphasises not just the individual coming to share their social partners’ understanding,
but to shape and transform that understanding in the face of new experience. Rather than accepting a socially deterministic view, Valsiner proposes "most of human development takes place through active ignoring and neutralisation of most of social suggestions to which the person is subjected in everyday life" (Valsiner 1998: 393). He suggests that this is essential to buffer individuals’ personality against the demands of constant social suggestions. He continues,

“Hence, what is usually viewed as socialisation efforts (by social institutions or parents) is necessarily counteracted by the active recipients of such efforts who can neutralise or ignore a large number of such episodes, aside from single particularly dramatic ones.”

Taylor (1985) claims that humans are not alone in having desires and motives in making choices. However, humans, unlike other animals, appear to have the capacity for reflective self-evaluation manifested in second order desires. Rather than merely being driven by external pressures and sources - subjectivities of cultural and social norms that are part of the premediate experience - individuals have the capacity to be reflective and evaluative about the societal press to which some claim they are wholly subject. Even when confronted with strong social press, the negotiated process of meaning making direct individuals in quite another course of action. Hodges (1998) through exercising her agency came to reject the kinds of values that underpin an institutionalised view of childcare education. This led her to disassociate and dis-identify with the social practice in which she had participated. Similarly, Fenwick (1998) identifies the exercise of agency as women come to find meaning in their work, which extends beyond selecting options of what is provided by the workplace. In a hairdressing salon where there was a strong, pervasive and particular social guidance that directed the activities in the salon (e.g. who did what tasks, how they were done, on what basis individuals were allowed to talk, the ordering of everyday activities, even the need to communicate without speaking) did not result in the hairdressers’ uncritical acceptance of these demands, nor were there uniform responses in their cognitive representations of activities and preferences, despite the strong social press (Billett, 2003).

However, these interpretations still suggest that that human agency operates within and through social structures (Ratner, 2000). Individuals are always socially related, albeit through their subjectivities or more immediate experiences (Bhaskar, 1998). Therefore, any action that individual agency initiates, including action to transform society, always takes place from a social basis - "Thus if the social cannot be reduced to (and is not a product of) individual (and) society is a necessary condition for any intentional human act at all.” (Bhaskar 1998, p. 34). Yet, it is important to recognise reflexivity in this outcome. The degree of social press is not uniform or uniformly impelling. It represents a suggestion that may be weaker or stronger dependant on its influence or emphasis. Everyday, individuals engage with or transgress any number of social practices, mostly obliviously. This is because they are not key interlocutors. There are presumably social (communities of) practice in the canteen, shop, service station that individual's engage with fleetingly and as highly peripheral participants. Then, there are those social (communities of) practices in which we engage with perhaps a higher degree of interdependence (e.g. family, our workplace). So just as the social suggestion is not uniform or easily extended, so too its engagement by individuals might be at best partial, perhaps because the press may be unknown and recognised by us (e.g. adolescents’ social fads may be lost on their parents). Yet, as with appropriation, with subjectivities we are capable of being voluntarily enmeshed, particularly where this consonance between the two, as in appropriation.
Socialising the individual
While side-stepping the task of reconciling distinct views about structure and agency, a more socially inclusive, engaged and sympathetic view of the individual may be helpful in bridging some differences. The individual is often characterised as being oppositional to the social. Cognitive psychological accounts are presented or interpreted in ways that represent individuals and their minds as asocial beings, or without social reference points. Much is made of this in social cultural critiques of individualistic orientations to psychological theorising (Bruner, 2001). To incorporate the premediate influences of cultural practices over time (subjectivities) as well as the immediate social experience (situational contributions), and post immediate experiences (how subsequent experiences are constituted) there is a need to reconstitute what comprises the individual in psychological accounts, to acknowledge that individual cognition or cognitive experience is shaped reciprocally and continuously through participation in different and diverse instances of social practice throughout their life histories or ontogenies (Billett, 1998). Or, as (Valsiner, 1998) (1988:2) proposes, that the individual “simultaneously maintains his or her autonomy relative to the given social context, and has become the way he or she is through the history of such relations.”

The concept of ontogeny - individual development over a lifespan - positions the individual centrally in the ongoing process of interdependence between the cognitive and the social experience. This includes the subjectivities of cultural and social norms and practices that individuals engage in different ways and in different combinations of multitudinous social practices and the social world that surrounds and shapes those practices. Individuals’ idiosyncratic cognitive experiences then can be understood more as a social construct or as (Baldwin (1930) reminds us, that the individual is a social outcome. This conception of the individual offers a more reflexive way of addressing the question of whether change is premised on individual or social factors by proposing that changes are wrought in complex to interdependences between the two. This interdependence is negotiated between, and with differing emphasis and energy between social and individual agency. With hairdressers, it was the particular pattern of procedures that constrained the selection of possible procedures – ‘what we do here is’, yet, more authorised individuals (i.e. owners and managers) exercised solutions outside of the salons’ norms (Billett, 2003). One hairdresser suggested a radical haircut to confront the rather than hide a client’s birthmark. In doing so, he was remaking the norms of the social cultural practice of hairdressing. This remaking was a product of agentic action engaged in a socially and culturally constituted practice, yet one but also positioned the hairdresser to contravene the norms of practice.

If individuals’ cognitive experience is seen as being shaped through participation in different ways in multifold instances of social practice through moment-by-moment or micro-genetic processes (Rogoff, 1990) then the socio-genesis of individuals and their cognitive experiences, subjectivities, identities and agencies are to be understood as being negotiated between unique cumulative experiences and the social world. This view posits individuals’ cognitive, individualistic traits and ways of dealing with the world as being accumulatively social: negotiated ontogenically with social practices and norms (i.e. what activities are individuals are allowed to engage in and in what ways) at different points in their life histories. It suggests that individual idiosyncrasies and their cognitive experience are a unique combination of experiences throughout their life histories. Rather than being asocial, the concept of individual can be seen as being socially shaped, albeit in unique ways. This may help in elaborating and understanding how the individual and the social interact and their consequences for ontogenetic development, and the generational transformation of societies and communities.
Individual agency and agentic action at work

One way to exercise the role of individual agency and interdependence with the social world (and its influence) is to consider how individuals think about and participate in their paid work. This assists considering how issues associated with individuals’ identity and subjectivity influence their agency as they engage in work. In research that sought to understand learning in workplace settings, individuals were observed and interviewed engaging in a highly committed manner in work that many would view as being low status or lowly paid (e.g. coal production workers, process workers, call centre workers)(Billett, 2002b). While these workers sometimes reported dissatisfaction with their workplace affordances (e.g. conditions and the actions of fellow workers and employers), they also claimed and demonstrated high levels of commitment to and interest in their work. The sense is of workers who take their work seriously, want to do a good job and be accepted by their peers as good performers. That is, they engage in this work in ways that exercises their agency, yet directed to their subjectivities (e.g. approval of peers) and identity (e.g. a seen as being a good team worker). How should we think about these individuals? Are they merely cultural dopes, who have been duped into self-exploitation, as structural accounts would suggest? Or are these individuals exercising agency consistent with their identities and subjectivities? If the former view is taken, it suggests that we should value individual's vocational practice and engagement in terms of its extrinsic worth (e.g. its status, standing, purposes). That is, some forms of work are highly paid, have high status and are viewed worthy of individual's engagement and exercise of their interest, passion and agency.

The sociologist Wright Mills (1973) claims that “For most employees, work has a generally unpleasant quality. If there is little Calvinist compulsion to work among property-less factory workers or clerks, there is also little Renaissance exuberance in the work of the insurance clerk, freight handler, or department store saleslady”. He supports, what some contemporary commentators propose about service work, such as call centre workers. Yet, call centre workers have been identified whose practice was complex, varied, subject to skilfulness on their part and, moreover, they worked in a highly collaborative and supportive way (Billett, 2002b). Their work had many of the qualities that elsewhere enjoys high status. So valuing work solely on its extrinsic qualities seems highly problematic. Levels of salaries and status do not indicate social worth. From a values perspective, it has been claimed that auditors’ work is non-emancipatory and, therefore, not worth being taught in higher education. This critique proposes that individuals’ work should be valued on the basis of some object measure of social standing or social worth. This suggests that the extrinsic worth of work is central rather than its intrinsic value to individuals. However, to somebody from a background of low economic or educational expectations becoming an auditor might be personally or socially emancipatory. It is these kinds of goals that migrant populations in countries such as Australia seek for themselves and their children. Although doctors, lawyers and accountants are seen as desirable occupations and have potential positive social purposes (like call centre workers), they are not immune from bad practice and exercise of self-interest. Similarly, although the degree of discretion workers are permitted is seen as highly desirable (Billett and Pavlova, 2003) it can be a perilous measure. In a recent study, (Billett et al., in press) a worker granted high levels of discretion in her work, which was closely aligned to her personal goals and subjectivity, was arguably being exploited by the breadth and discretion her work practice afforded her. Even though her work was of social worth, being directed to social justice, it made almost intolerable
demands upon her. Does a case of self-exploitation in a worthy cause make it less to open to criticism?

To propose that worthwhile work is confined to that which is highly paid, of presumed social benefit, permits significant personal autonomy and potential advancement, may render, the majority of workers as engaging in meaningless pursuits, devoid of individual purpose or intrinsic value as Wright Mills (1973) suggests. However, across different kinds of work individuals want to be seen as performing effectively, often gaining a sense of identity and sense of self through their work and its relationship to their lives in the community outside the workplace. In one study, a group of males were facing redundancy. Given the shortage of work in the region that attracted that level of pay and carried similar masculine qualities, the threat to these workers was more than loss of income, it included their standing as males in the community. Somerville (2002) illuminates the powerful links between cultural practices and individuals’ work. She notes strong overlap between the qualities of work and individuals’ identity in the aged care and coal mining sectors which extends to individuals sustaining and accepting injury as part of the interplay between individual and community identity (i.e. age care workers have bad backs, coal miners carry work-related injuries with pride). It requires significant incidents in individual lives for them to critically appraise their work practices. They had shrugged off the social suggestion, as Valsiner (1998) noted, and then were often frustrated in how their suggestions (as injured workers) to colleagues were in turn rebuffed.

So, on what basis should we value particular vocational practice over others? It certainly seems no more problematic to value it in terms of its intrinsic worth to individuals than the salary it attracts, its cultural standing, its contribution to the community and the discretion it affords individuals. Such a view is consistent with that advanced by Dewey (1916) about vocations as directions in life, a personal journey linked to individuals’ goals and practices. He proposed that all kinds of human activity should be seen as equally valid vocations, from the practice of professionals, to the trades, to the act of parenting. Their validity resides in what they mean to and how they suit individuals engaged in them. To engage in paid pursuits that they were not suited to or interested in was, to Dewey, a waste of human potential and its practice akin to slavery: a waste of individual creativity and energy. However, advancing individual agency as a means through which individuals can be fulfilled, is not to absolve social problems such as inequity, nor is it about creating a false sense of equity, democracy and fulfillment and denying alienation (Ratner, 2000). It is about humanising social relations and social structures, and locating a role for individuals in directing their cognition and remaking culture.

This issue goes beyond curiosity. It has a lot to do with how we consider vocational practice and how we direct resources in vocational education. For instance, if call centre work is deemed to be beneath individuals dignity and without social value, then it would be difficult to support call centre workers’ learning particularly using public funding. If Wright-Mills and others views are correct, then we should curtail much of what currently constitutes the provision of vocational education. However, this view denies the importance of a vocation to individuals and how it relates to their personal goals and identity or addresses critically their subjectivities. If a more relative position is adopted, it might assist thinking about how vocational education might best proceed.
Implications for vocational education

Over the last two decades, in response to domestic and international sentiments and economic pressure, the concept and purposes of Australian vocational education have become intensely focused on meeting the needs of powerful interests (i.e. industry, enterprises, unions). The concept of occupation has been set aside as industry standards, employer needs and industrial demarcations have shaped both the conception of vocational education and the method of its enactment. All this constitutes a significant privileging of a particular kind of social agency that has acted to deny the individual agency of many of its actors. To secure a better balance, it is worth considering vocational education and issues associated policy and practice from perspectives reflecting the interests and agency of those individuals who participate in vocational education. Dewey (1916) proposed two goals for vocational education: firstly to help individuals identify and select desired occupational pursuits and, secondly, to assist them develop the capacities to achieve their vocational goals. This suggests a view of vocation education more focused on individuals’ interest than current conceptions.

Curriculum development practices in Australian vocational education have done little to acknowledge the interests of those who are expected to implement or are subject to its products and practices. As many papers resented that this conference over the past decade have claimed, teachers have been largely been ignored over the last two decades. Their interests, subjectivities and identity as content and pedagogic experts has been set aside and they are expected to be subservient to those powerful interests that have been granted leadership and executive control of curriculum development processes. The teachers are merely to implement what others have developed. Yet, there is a greater independence than the sponsors intended. The evidence suggests that, however, teachers have ignored, subverted or transformed imposed practices such as competency-based training, yet are constrained by them (Billett et al 1999). Moreover, the key participants of vocational education, students, are routinely ignored, despite having interests and goals that will shape their engagement and success in vocational education programs. It is the exception when students are consulted about their needs and aspirations in ways that shape curriculum development and policy. Anderson (Anderson, 1998) claims that only one of the 1200 consultations about the national training reform agenda in the early 1990s were students consulted. A student union requested input into the Deveson inquiry about the cost of training associated with award restructuring. It might be claimed that students are uninformed. However, they often have clearly defined and strategic intentions. For instance, one cohort of TAFE students at a regional college identified their purposes of participating in a clerical industry course in the following terms:

- A good job, which is not in a factory and pays well so I can buy a house.
- Partner wants to retire from train driving in 5 years time and drive trucks. She wants to be the bookkeeper for this business.
- Has been in catering for the last 10 years but was made redundant last year. She enjoyed some short computer courses and decided to work her way up the ladder.
- Daughter is now in high school and will need to know how to use computer. It is important that she can show her, because the daughter has a learning disability.
- Completed a course last year, Cert. in General Ed. for adults, and decided she wanted to do another course. She is new to the region and hopes to meet people and get some work in office admin, even as a volunteer. She has not been in the workforce for 20 years and wants to bring herself up to current standards and get over her fear of computers. (Billett, 2000)

These purposes suggest intentionalities and subjectivities that are salient to these individuals’ identities. Yet their identities and agency are manifested in ways often
remote from the aims of national industry-derived curriculum initiatives. Therefore, even for the most pragmatic purposes, there is a need to understand how students direct their agentic actions. One recently graduated mature student pointed to the need to leave her new job because having spent so much time learning word processing, spreadsheet databases it only had a typewriter. School leaving age vocational students, articulated their purposes for participating in vocational education, which reflected clear direction. Teachers, of course, know the consequences of the mismatch between students’ aspirations and expectations, and experiences that they are able or directed to provide. They also know that not all students’ goals or preferences are either realistic or well informed (Hodkinson & Bloomer, 2002). Nevertheless, these still provide bases by which students engage in their vocational courses. The focus for curriculum development might be to position vocations as individuals’ goals as well as something demanded by industry and enterprises. Rather than being wholly subject to it, a key goal might be to invite students to actively participate in the process of remaking vocational practices in which they are, or aim to exercise their career trajectory. As Cole (2002) has proposed, it is the students who will play the key role in remaking these practices.

In investigating how small business operators came to learn about implementing the goods and service tax, individuals’ identity and intentionality was salient in their engagement and learning. Beyond the localised support that these operators engaged with, the key factors determining how they engaged in learning and what support they sought and, from where, was associated with their interests and identity. Their level of interest shaped the intensity of their efforts to learn and the scope of the learning experiences they initiated or organised. Their identities were instrumental in decisions about whether this initiative warranted their attention, and in what ways. For instance, while an entrepreneur was highly focused on this task, professionals (i.e. Vet and optometrist) whose practice constitutes a small business were less interested in learning about this administrative process. Others could take care of it. So individual identity and intentionality are central to the apparently intractable problem of engaging small business operators and workers in VET. Analogously, the evidence arising from another study suggests attempts to persuade employers to invest in their employees’ training is unlikely to be achieved through government mandate, as these are generative of mastery not an appropriation of the value of the further development of employees’ skills. Where there resides a clear need as identified by those who have to make a commitment, then the likelihood of expenditure is higher. Efforts to mandate appear to have generated outcomes contrary to intentions: recalcitrance and the commodification of enterprise commitment to training.

Individuals’ occupational identity, the standing status of the occupation is central to individuals’ identity and well-being (Pusey, 2003). However, policies and practice in the last two decades have arguably eroded the standing of many vocational practices. The insistence on competency-based standards, non-graded assessment, modularisation and the widespread marketisation of vocational education has probably done little to elevate the standing of vocational practice and knowledge. This situation is exacerbated by a lack of championing of vocations within the community – a supportive exercise of social agency. Some communities make a virtue of particular activities (e.g. agricultural work, manufacturing work, coalmining). Elsewhere, there appears to be little of the kind of championing of paid vocations that occurs in some countries in northern Europe. In Australia there are few trade associations or guilds championing the richness, significance and worth of vocational practice, except when some perilous skills shortage occurs (e.g. the recent activities of the Victorian Brick and Block Layers association). Instead, vocational education has been aligned to contested industrial relations. If unions
make claims about the complexity of work practices, they will be dismissed as ambits. Employers are unlikely to champion the richness and sophistication of vocational knowledge lest this jeopardise their efforts to control wages. All this works to the detriment of vocational education. Lacking here is the kind of social affordance and individual intentionality (subjectivity and identity) that elsewhere sees the higher level of enterprise sponsorship of vocational skills development and individuals (i.e. apprentices) making complimentary sacrifices in their levels of pay and hours of work to secure skill development. These subjectivities appear to be the product of a reciprocal interdependence between social partners.

Summary and conclusions
In sum, it has been proposed to bring the individual to the foreground in conceptions of the socio-genesis of knowledge and learning, vocations, vocational education policies and practices. The attempt here is an initial drafting and outlining of some bases by which we might consider the relatedness and reciprocity in the interdependence between individuals and their social worlds in learning vocational practice. To view individuals as being wholly or strongly subject to the social world, in its immediate, premediate and postmediate forms, denies an interdependent role for individual agency. As with the immediate experience, the premediate experience, which is the source of identities and subjectivities, is held as a product of an accumulative and ongoing interdependence between the social and individual experience. Yet even when there is sympathy between the cognitive and the social experience, as in appropriation, there is likely to be misunderstanding, misinterpretation and differences in constructs. Human cognition is neither uncritical nor limitless, nor is it machine-like or wholly rational. Instead, it is a selective, discriminating and mediating, yet at times just plain woolly as is our intentions and energies. Although the degree of individual autonomy in transforming knowledge remains the source of debate and difference, it has been proposed here that, more than being able to select from social suggestion, individuals’ agentic actions likely have the capacity to remake cultural practice in transformative ways. Yet it is unhelpful to view individuals’ choices in the options available, the goals to be pursued and how they are pursued as being determined by the immediate social structures without a consideration of subjectivities arising through these cultural practices and shared experiences across a lifespan. Perhaps relations between individual and the social world might best be understand as relations between ontogeny and history, operating in parallel and through negotiation where not only the immediate, but pre mediate and post mediate experiences coalesce. It is these relations that are continually engaged in remaking and reproducing cultural and social practice, as in vocational learning.

References


