Negotiated engagement: worker agency and learning at work.

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Abstract.

The sociocultural project presents personal learning in and through work as the socially mediated process and product of participation in workplace activity (eg, Lave & Wenger 1991, Rogoff 1995, Ratner 2000, Ashton 2004). It privileges the social and cultural aspects of the individual workers’ context as the dominant influence or mediator of the changes to personal work practice that evidence work-based learning. In consideration of individual workers’ contributions to such participation, at best, this view establishes learning as the co-incidental relationship between workers and their work. It is a relationship of co-participatory interdependence that is relationally derived through the interactivity of worker agency and the social press of the workplace (Billett 2006). In a desire to more comprehensively understand the personal contributions of individual workers to their learning at work, this paper argues that the interactivity that constitutes this relationship is best viewed as negotiated engagement and that it is the agency of the individual worker that is the locus of action that initiates and sustains this relationship. Drawing on recent studies of worker agency and learning in a variety of different workplaces, this paper elaborates these issues and suggests that personal learning in and through work is the worker negotiated control and conduct of their engagement in the participative requirements of their work.

Work, learning and participation

The relationship between the individual employee and their work that establishes learning as a fundamental practice of that endeavour (Harris et al 1998) has been conceptualised in very distinct ways by researchers from a diversity of socioculturally related disciplines. These disciplines provide valuable and different vantage points from which to view and understand the complexities of learning in and through the cultural activity of work. For example, anthropologists, Lave and Wenger (1991) define it as participatory, being based in hierarchical and situational levels of participation in communities of practice. Social psychologist, Wertsch (1995) theorises it as mediational, being based in the interplay of a unique combination of personal and contextual moments that constitute the major influences on action. From the perspective of cultural psychology, Billett (2004) describes it as relational, being based in the interaction of individual ontogeneses (life histories) and affordances (the invitational qualities of engagement opportunities and constraints) of the particular workplace. Bailey, Hughes and Moore (2004), as economic and educational theorists, present it as experiential, being based in access to and acceptance of the social means of knowledge control to which the individual is subjected. Rogoff, cultural anthropologist, (1995) defines it as appropriation when individuals, through their involvement in one cultural activity, are in the process (conscious or otherwise) of becoming prepared for subsequent involvement in related activities. All these conceptualisations of work-based learning reconcile the challenging relationship of individual agency and the social context of work by variably advancing learning as a
participative practice. That practice is a form of dialectic interaction between the person and their work-culture environment. That is, through individuals’ participative immersion in the cultural practices of their particular work they become part of it, inseparable from it, their interaction with and within it the very process of learning.

This interaction is dialectic, based in contradiction, contest, tension and compromise through time and experience as the individual is shaped and directed by their cultural practices (Rogoff 2003). The individual worker emerges through these processes as some form of successful synthesis of personal and social forces. They become the participative product, the reconciliation of the individual and the social made possible by the necessity of their learning to participate. So, continuing with the distinct perspectives of the five researchers cited above, from the Lave and Wenger (1991) perspective the individual becomes a more central member of the community, their participation and subsequent learning evidence a growing competence that grants passage and draws them more fully into their cultural practice. For Wertsch (1995), the individual develops through their actions that correspond with the new possibilities enabled by the tensions of co-incidental and competing mediations. Moments generate actions that generate moments. Learning, like the developing individual, is derivative of new influences (both personally and socially sourced) that generate new possibilities that give rise to new influences, and so on – a constant flow of “dialectically interacting moments … of human action” (Wertsch 1995:71). From Billett’s (2004) perspective, individuals’ participation is co-participative, reflecting a kind of joint venture between what the workplace enables or affords its participants and what those participants are willing or able to make use of as they engage through performance. The conditions under which this relational interdependence of contextual affordances and participant engagement is enacted are unique to each participant by virtue of their specific life’s history and the legacy this has endowed them. The individual is therefore participatively bound and constituted in this legacy as their capacity to engage with their environment. For Bailey, Hughes and Moore (2004) the participative constraints that reconcile the individual and the social through cultural action reside more predominantly in the contextual as structural and political forces to which the individual is subjected and learns through experience to exert some control over. Learning is participative access to power and the individual is constituted in that access. Lastly, from Rogoff’s (1995:151) perspective, learning is appropriation and “participation is itself the process of appropriation”. The developing individual is fundamental, and through the learning that characterises this development, is constituted in the changes occurring in the activities in which they participate.

In advancing these various participative practice conceptualisations of workplace learning, these sociocultural perspectives and the theories or models they construct, present the dialectic interaction that unites the individual and the social as some form of interdependent partnership between the person and their context. This partnership is in a constant state of flux, characterised by change that generates and is generated by the dynamics of dialectic interactivity. By concentrating on learning as the process within and product of that partnership, these theories and models are unable to fully account for the fluctuating bases on which that partnership is established and importantly, how individuals’ enter into and sustain their contributions to that partnership. This is partly due, firstly, to the way the partnership is conceptualised as participative interaction that privileges learning as the practice that mediates the
partnership. And secondly, to not fully accounting for the ways individuals engage in the processes that constitute the partnership and the learning it supports.

Billett, Smith & Barker (2005) present these problems in terms of viewing the partnership as the joint exercise of individual and workplace agencies. That is, the conditioned or mediated enactment of personal and contextual capacities, interests and priorities. The partnership, then, becomes one of relational interdependence - relational because the contributions of each are not equally arrayed and enacted (Malle et al 2001). Rather, they are highly complex, variably contested, supported, construed, adjusted and withdrawn at times and under equally variable conditions that may approximate or realise a range of relationship characteristics, including mutuality, hostility and or indifference (Williams 2002).

In a desire to more comprehensively understand the personal contributions of individual workers to their learning at work and more fully account for the complexities that define these contributions, this paper argues that the relational interdependence that constitutes workers, learning and work may be best conceptualised as negotiation. That is, individual workers’ participative learning practices are transacted through their agentic conduct and control of their engagement within them. And therefore, it is the agency of the individual worker that is the locus of action that initiates and sustains the negotiation of worker, learning and work.

Following from the introduction above, this paper firstly presents the conceptual understandings of personal agency and negotiation from which it explores the relationship between worker, work and learning. Secondly it outlines the sources and procedures employed in its exploration of the working and learning practices of specific workers. Thirdly, through some illustrative examples of the working and learning practices of one of the participants, it discusses some of the findings that have emerged from the third phase of the analysis within this project. It concludes this by suggesting some tentative propositions about the nature of viewing worker participative practices as transactive rather than interactive.

**Personal agency**

Personal agency is problematic and yet fundamental to any and all considerations about the relationship between the individual worker and their work, and subsequently the nature of learning. Agency may be seen as giving shape and purpose to the social and personal power of individuals and their influence, in and through the lived events and practices that manifest as worker’s actions at work. Action is influence and it is the concept of personal agency that captures and locates this form of social power within the individual and their activities. Its conceptualisations are numerous and shaped by the diversity of perspectives from which it is viewed.

For example, American sociologist and anthropologist Goffman (1959) utilised the metaphor of the theatre to account for the agency of the individual as a psycho-social performance he termed ‘the presentation of the self in everyday life’. In this sense, the individual is conceptualised as both performer and character performed. As character, the self is imputed as the product, the dramatic effect, of a scene that is staged for an audience – it is socially presented (Goffman 1959). Such a self must be seen to have agency that attributes it with the identifiable and normatively acceptable impression
of personal and social authenticity. In contemporary western culture this may be seen to equate with what Hampe (2002) identifies as the four bases of personal autonomy – the ability to commit to the future, take responsibility for actions, justify actions and recognise others as likewise autonomous. As performer, the self seeks to influence the definition of its various sociocultural roles and situations by “mobilising his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey” (Goffman 1959:16). At work, for example, this may be as simple as the conveyance of competence through routine performance. Agency as such is the performer-self’s personal and social management of its desired impression via the expression of its character-self within the socio-cultural structures that constitute its performance.

Differently, British sociologist, Giddens (1991) elaborates these themes through a conception of the “the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography” (Giddens 1991:53) – a personal ontology of continuity through learned experience in psycho-social activity. Physically embodied and socially empowered through this experience, the self learns to become a competent agent. “To learn to become a competent agent – able to join with others on an equal basis in the production and reproduction of social relations – is to be able to exert a continuous, and successful, monitoring of self…..To be a competent agent, moreover, means not only maintaining such continuous control, but being seen by others to do so” (Giddens 1991:56). Agency therefore, is the personal practice of self-reflexivity that exerts and achieves self-continuity derived from engagement in sociocultural activity.

Contrastingly, British sociologist, Archer (2000) posits agency as the practice of who we are, not on the basis of competence in monitored self control, but on the bases of personally achieved concerns gained through ineluctable relations with the natural, practical and social orders of reality. “In short, we are who we are because of what we care about: in delineating our ultimate concerns and accommodating our subordinate ones, we also define ourselves. We give shape to our lives, which constitutes our internal personal integrity, and this pattern is recognisable by others as our concrete singularity” (Archer 2000:10). Ever relationally active in reality, and therefore multiply constituted through the diversity of social roles, power positions and collective affiliations this requires through the lifespan, the individual determines, through their on-going evaluative review, why and where their value will reside. Agency as such is the measure and practice of personal and social worth that is arbitrated by individuals’ “prioritising their ultimate concerns, which will determine how much of themselves is invested in their social identities, and therefore what they will bring to living them out” (Archer 2000:12 italics in original).

The exercise of agency that reveals these processes of self priority and performance is active choice. That choice however is not premised on the individual’s freedom to do anything (although this could never be entirely discounted given the creative potential of any social situation). Rather, it is premised on freedom of doing what is possible within the alternatives available – an existential fact recognised by Sartre when he stated, “what is not possible is not to choose” (1946:14). Drawing on post-structuralist theory, Fenwick’s (2004) examination of portfolio workers presents this reality of choice as engaging individuals in anchoring their subjectivity, and the knowledge and practices that enact it, in positions of identity and relationships that secure desired work outcomes such as reliable expert or innovative professional. Equally however, such choices may engage individuals in escaping and or resisting
subjectivities that fix their identities or subjugate them to positions other than those desired or required for successful participation – what Davies (2000) referred to as the ‘lines of flight’ along which the agency of the subject is exercised in their evasion of the subject positions they are subjected to through social participation and the discourses by which their participation is conditioned.

Basing individual choice in the tensions of competing subject positions acknowledges the multidimensionality of agency. The person, event, context, cognition, culture, are all simultaneously realised through the individual’s actions that animate the intervention of a choice from within the range of possibilities available in any particular moment. The complexities of that intervention, the exercise of agency, should not be underestimated or under represented in learning theory. Theorising work-based learning requires acknowledging the personal power of ‘who is learning’ through an elaboration of the simultaneous multiplicities their actions connote. These connotations are more than analytic abstractions of personal sociocultural activity. They are, at minimum, declarations of the ways in which the individual, by their very presence, influences the reality of social experience. This influence is an existential fundamental that is captured in its conceptualisation as agency. Implicitly, the tendency to narrowly define agency as some form of discretionary power that individual agents may or may not have, dependent on their position within particular sociocultural structures such as a workplace, fails to account for the array of practices that constitute learning in sociocultural activity. Organisational denial and or suppression of personal agency as discretionary activity cannot negate learning - it can only seek to control it through its construction of what Foucault (1977) described as ‘docile bodies’ who seemingly acquiesce under the dominance of power over them and yet never cease to care about themselves (Foucault 1978). Contrastingly, high levels of personal discretionary activity in organisational positions of power cannot confirm learning – it can, as Argyris (1982) points out, evidence counter productive responses to learning needs that suppress personal and organisational growth and development. Therefore, personal agency cannot solely be understood in terms of its opposition to or contrast with any single aspect of psycho-social experience. It cannot simply stand in opposition to structure as it is always part of it. Equally, it cannot simply stand as contrasted in hierarchies of social power because it is always imputative within them. It is always implicated in learning.

So, agency is the personal assertion of value (priorities, preferences, capacities, etc – enacted in choice) and the force of their intervention through personal presence in the participative practices that generate the multiplicity of psycho-social experience evident in sociocultural activity.

**Negotiation.**

Within the sociocultural project, negotiation is a fundamental process that functions in a number of ways to co-construct or co-constitute the bases by which relationships progress. It is important to acknowledge that such an understanding of negotiation goes beyond the connotations of bargaining or deal-making and conflict-resolution that are commonly understood through the negotiation practices of those such as diplomats, lawyers and business people. These types of negotiation usually engage parties with known and stated objectives in planned processes of brokering eventual shared agreement through posturing and compromise (Raiffa 1990). These are
referred to here as telic negotiations in that they tend towards a goal that is definable or can be identified as realised at some point through the process. They reveal important aspects of negotiation but they are insufficient to its fuller understanding as a personal and social relational process.

For example, in an examination of the diversity of idiosyncratic working conditions that employees bargain for themselves, Rousseau (2005) identifies four key types of negotiation: (i) those initiated, either implicitly or explicitly, by the employer and accepted by the employee; (ii) those similarly initiated by the employee and accepted by the employer; (iii) those co-operatively arranged or mutually initiated and accepted by employer and employee; and (iv) those unacknowledged and accepted by both parties through unplanned change or happenstance. The first three of these categories may be referred to as planned negotiations - the fourth as unplanned. All such work based negotiations engage people directly or indirectly as single workers, employer representatives, effected co-workers and or outside affiliates (such as family, customers, etc) in relational processes of bargaining or dealing to find common and accepted positions of action. Some of those negotiations that Rousseau (2005) would identify as belonging to the fourth category however, are what is referred to here as atelic negotiations in that they lack end points of identifiable realisation. These atelic negotiations are ongoing, never achieving outcomes of agreement, acquiescence or even cessation that typify bargain type negotiations. Their relational qualities are not fully accounted for by posturing and compromise, whether direct or indirect. Yet all negotiations establish bases of progression as accepted positions of action.

Relational positions of actions derive from all negotiations and function, explicitly or implicitly and with or without benefit for either party, as interdependencies on which further action, and therefore relationships, progress. Such interdependencies may be captured as amenable agreements or contracts. Equally, they may be more loosely held as shared understandings – what some have referred to as the ‘psychological contract’ of unwritten but presumably shared beliefs about what employers and employees offer each other through work (Grant 1999). Additionally, they might, in contrast, be interpreted as coercive obligations. They may pertain to material conditions, abstracted ideas and meanings or other relational processes to do with people (communication, relationships, status) and regulations (procedures, sanctions). Further, they need not be, but can be, founded on acknowledged goals or motivations of self-interest by any parties involved. In sum, these interdependencies are constitutive of personal, cultural and social values - the norms, roles, procedures and expectations (Kramer & Messick 1995) that comprise the sociocultural means of transaction that are operant in any given context at the time.

To these important functions of negotiation as a relational process that positions participants within the changes that are occurring in their particular context must be added its function of intra-personal transformation. Negotiation, planned and unplanned, telic and atelic, necessitates individuals’ self-evaluation. This may be conceptualised as participants negotiating with themselves as they monitor, evaluate and regulate their actions relative to their expectations and personal capacities within the process and its outcomes or directions. For example, phase and cyclic models of negotiation (see Pruitt 1981, Druckman 1999, Saner 2005), present the process as progressing through stages of differing actions. These models note the necessity of
participants’ organising, researching, analysing, judging, accommodating, solving problems and making decisions before and throughout. These actions may be identified as skills or cognitive and meta-cognitive processes that are deployed relative to the demands of the context and other participants but equally deployed relative to self. They may, to differing extents, reflect what Argyris and Schon (1978) defined as double-loop learning that results from the self-reflexive and hypothesising practices of participative action in cultural context. What generates from engagement in such evaluative practices is personal change, as learning, as adaptation, as involvement and contextual or organisational change as new procedures and objectives. So, engaging in negotiation, either planned or unplanned and telic or atelic, functions to transform individual participants relative to their context and relative to their original self positioning or understanding. The depth and endurance of such personal transformations become further variables within the sets of resources that individuals bring to and engage with in and through the negotiation process.

Examining worker participative practices - methodology

This paper explores the utility and veracity of these conceptual issues to inform learning theory through an examination of the participative working practices of a group of 12 workers – three engaged in different types of work from each of four different workplaces. The diversity of participative practices and employment standing and status this group afforded the research, enabled some examination of the differences between employees within the same workplace and between employees who held similar levels of employment status across the four workplaces.

The workplaces and participants involved in the study were: (i) a gymnasium and the manager, a trainer and a receptionist; (ii) a restaurant and the chef/senior partner, manager/junior partner and a waitress; (iii) an information technology (IT) support section within a university and the manager and two client support staff; and (iv) a fire station and a station manager, a senior fire officer and a fireman.

In depth interviews, together with workplace observations, were conducted with each of the participants over a period of 18 months. The first two of these interviews were conducted very early in the project as the means of accounting for the foundational interdependencies on and by which their work proceeds. These consisted of, firstly, accounts of the workplace and its practices, the institutional facts (Searle 1995) of their work – conditions, norms, procedures, practices etc. And secondly, accounts of the workers’ histories, preferences and understandings of their work. Together, these accounts comprise the relational dualities of work affordances and worker engagement, the contextual and individual contributions to the participative premises of work (Billett, Smith & Barker 2005). Following these initial interviews, a series of progress interviews and observations mapped changes in the 12 participants’ personal and contextual working and learning practices. They also enabled the participants to comment on any initial analysis from previous interviews and so engaged them more closely in elaborations of their work.

Analysis of the first two interviews constituted the first phase of analysis within this project and revealed highly complex interconnections between workplace affordances and how they are engaged with, construed and constructed by the participants as exercised through their intentionality. Working and learning came to be seen as highly
integrated practices that are based in the relational enactments of individual capacities, interests and epistemologies as they agentically engage with and in the (re)making of the sociocultural practices that comprise their work (see Billett, Smith & Barker 2005). The first round of progress interviews founded the second phase of analysis within this project and suggested four bases on which the relational interdependencies of social and individual agency (workplace affordances and worker engagement) are actively played out. These bases were; reflection, performance roles, dialogue and rewards. In brief, these bases emerged from the analysis as domains of activity by and through which identifiable worker and workplace contributions unite as the generative sociocultural practices of work and learning (see Smith & Billett 2006). This paper briefly reports on the third phase that extends from that analysis and considers ways in which the relationally enacted unity of worker, work and learning can be elaborated as worker negotiated engagement. It proceeds by advancing some of the identified work negotiation practices of Rosie, a casual waitress at the restaurant, as the means to illustrate how this might be done within a sociocultural constructivist paradigm of transaction beyond relational interaction.

Negotiated work practices and learning

Rosie works part-time as a waitress at ‘Platinum’, a small and popular inner suburban restaurant with a growing reputation for quality food. Rosie is also a full-time university student undertaking a psychology degree. She aspires to becoming a clinical psychologist and is working at Platinum to supplement a small inheritance from her grandmother. Together, these two income sources support her while studying. She is single and lives in a share house with her working cousin and one other student friend. At the beginning of the project she had only been working at Platinum for two months and was very junior in the ranks of part-time wait staff – there were no full-time wait staff. Through the 18 months of the project she had become, by virtue of her conscientious attitude and time in the job, the senior waitress. Through this, she had recently and very reluctantly, at the request of her boss and part owner Robert, taken on the responsibility of training new staff. In terms of Rousseau’s work negotiations, Rosie’s staff training responsibilities are type (i), initiated by employer and accepted by employee, and her position as senior waitress type (iv), having arisen through unplanned change that has come to be accepted by both employer and employee. Rosie’s reluctance to take on these extra duties that seem so naturally to attend her senior status stems from her vocational aspirations lying outside her work as a waitress – she only works at Platinum to fund her studies and doesn’t want the additional responsibilities staff training entails. Yet these planned and unplanned forms of telic negotiations have generated work practices that represent a diversity of learning she welcomes. Rosie comments,

I guess I’m not training people in a complete module where I know what I’m doing yet. I’m just kind of like going, oh well, that was wrong sorry but this is how we do it here. I’ve just been given the role and put in that position. So I’m learning myself. I’m actually starting to look at my role a lot, in a very different kind of light, like I’ve been thinking about how to explain it……I’d love to be able to gather from this experience, more clueyness, that I’d be able to monitor people because I’ve got this baby kind of belief that I don’t know what’s happened or what’s going on in the back of my head.
She is learning how to be conscious of her work, to reflect on her practice sufficient to its explicit instruction for others. Likewise she is learning about herself, about how she observes, assesses and understands her own learning and working methods. Becoming ‘cluey’ about self, practice and others was not part of the integrative set of values (interests, preferences, priorities, etc) that marked the contributions of either employer or employee in these telic negotiations. Rather they are emergent indices of the value that Rosie has agentically created through her engagement in the ongoing negotiations that characterise her work practice. This value derives from her practices and repositions her relative to her work and her understandings of herself. In doing so, the bases of her work, working and learning relationships have changed - been renegotiated by her engagement. Learning is integral to this process and the kinds of learning that mark double-loop (Argyris & schon 1978) type personal transformation may be seen as emerging through that negotiated engagement.

In different ways, the atelic negotiations that mark Rosie’s work have enabled her creation of value from the frustrations and inconvenience of making herself available for work on very short notice. When customer numbers were unpredictably higher than the rostered wait staff could support, the Platinum manager would start phoning the pool of casual wait staff. The first of these to be available for this work, meaning, be at work within 15-20 minutes, would be those most likely to be offered additional work in the future. For Rosie, this meant being at home, ready to take the call and respond quickly, particularly late on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday mornings when the lunch trade might require additional staff. Being away from the home, although contactable by mobile phone, meant her longer response time would be prohibitive. So Rosie had allocated these times as home study times. If the phone rang, she would secure desired extra work. If it did not, the frustrations of waiting and the inconvenience of putting off necessary out of the home duties were outweighed by the satisfaction of progressing her studies. This negotiated engagement in her work was ongoing, atelic, and yet had generated unacknowledged mutual value. The value Rosie had created for herself was interpreted by her employer as reliability and loyalty that was initially rewarded with consistent extra work, and later, when requested, employer acceptance of her taking time off in peak periods without jeopardising job security.

The busyness of a full restaurant generates a work intensity that can result in numerous important tasks being overlooked in efforts to ensure customers are served expeditiously. In negotiating these tasks, Rosie has developed a personal task management system that ensures they are completed without impeding the necessary timely and equitable flow of customer service. She states,

I’m very bad at remembering to do things unless I do them immediately so will often leave parts that are obvious. There’s always priorities but if everything seems a priority, I’ll do the things that are a little more subtle first because they’re in my mind and then I’ll do the obvious things [and] I leave things out. I have somehow developed that because it works for me. Like, I’m going to leave a pad out with stuff on it. Say I have to enter it into the computer to put it through to the kitchen. But a meal’s just arrived and it’s just got to go now because that’s a huge priority – as soon as the food arrives, it’s got to go. It’s got to go right then. So I’ll
leave the pad out on the middle of the bench so that I know when I come back I’ll see it and I’ll put it straight through. I could easily put things away and it’s not a malicious thing to leave things out to be messy. I see it and I remember. So I must do it, so I remember.

Rosie utilises a variety of handy props to trigger her attendance to necessary task sequencing through the intensity of busy service times. The pad above for order entry, as well as the misplaced fork for cutlery setting and the scrunchied napkin for table clearing serve her purposes. None of these triggers would seem unduly out of place, but her careful placement of them represents a working strategy that ensures customers are served in order of their arrival in the restaurant and their pacing through the courses of their meal. These atelic performance negotiations and the learning they evidence are clearly personally agentic practices that arise from Rosie’s unique contributions to her work.

The work must be done, but how it is done and the degrees of effort and attention that mark Rosie’s engagement with this work stem from the complex associations of personal and contextual contributions to these practices. Identifying these contributions as relational interdependencies of work affordances and individual engagement (Billett et al 2005) is necessary towards elaborating the nature of the associations or relationship processes that unite them in participation. Further, Rosie’s learning for, in and through her work resides in these processes as they constitute the participative practices that characterise her work. As the above brief account of some of Rosie’s particular practices reveals, they can be conceptualised as negotiation practices. Some of these practices equate to the planned and unplanned negotiations between employee and employer that Rousseau (2005) describes. Some are less clearly defined in this way, but never-the-less evidence the same kinds of tendencies towards goals or resolutions that mark distributive and integrative bargaining type negotiations. These are referred to here as telic negotiations. Yet others of these practices defy definition in terms of the outcomes they generate and the processes they utilise because they do not identify clear interactive participants that come to mutually accepted positions. These have been referred to here as atelic negotiations. All of the negotiations practices however, in Rosie’s case, evidence personal and contextual changes that equate directly to her transformed personal work practices, higher staff status, greater self understanding and indirectly to her student performance as an aspiring clinical psychologist.

So Rosie’s learning is not just something coincidental that emerges from these practices or is inculcated in them as both process and product. Rather, learning may be viewed as transacted as a fundamental value of her agentic engagement in the participative practices of her work. It is therefore her agency, exercised here in the vehicle of worker, work and learning relationship, that exacts the values on which her engagement in work is negotiated. These values may or may not be necessarily firm or acknowledged, either initially or subsequently. Rosie’s wages were firm and acknowledged values but her willingness to wait by the phone was not. Similarly, they may or may not be necessarily shared nor contested. Rosie’s perceptibly messy work habits of leaving pads and forks and dirty napkins lying around were not. However, these values may be said to constitute the mutualities from which relational positions unite as common. For Rosie, this common union was her work at Platinum. A fundamental mutuality was created by her need of casual work and Platinum’s need
of casual staff. From this initial position the negotiations that constitute her working and learning progress to transform her and Platinum in the unity of their transactions.

To conclude, premising learning for, in and through work on the participative practices of workers being mediated by the contextual press of their work, necessitates its being understood in the relational processes of dialectic interactivity. What follows from this, is the need to account for the contributions of individual workers to these processes. Quarantining them as relational interdependencies based in the personal legacies of a lifetime of engagement in sociocultural activity enables their identification as agentic qualities of person dependence (Billett et al 2005). However, as the above brief analysis of Rosie’s practices tentatively suggests, these contributions are more than the personal deployment of such legacies. Rather, they may be understood as the agentic and creative processes of engagement that actualise emergent sociocultural activity from the numerous possibilities inherent in any event. They may tentatively be conceptualised as negotiation practices of transaction that initiate and sustain the relationship of worker, work and learning as a unity of process beyond the separation of worker engagement and workplace affordances implicit in interaction.

References

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