

# NEGOTIATING LEARNING AND WORK: CLARIFYING WORKERS' PERSONAL PARTICIPATIVE PRACTICES

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## Abstract

*In recent years, workplace learning research has brought the person, the subject, of the worker to the centre of work learning theory in efforts to understand individuals' contributions to the social practice of vocational learning. A key term that emerges from this subject centred approach to learning theory is 'negotiation'. This term is often used to capture the interactivity of the vocational learner and the context of their participation as relational and interdependent (Billett 2008).*

*This paper suggests that the term negotiation is insufficiently understood in sociocultural constructivist perspectives of work learning and needs to be elaborated more fully to support understandings of workers' contributions to their learning practices. Fundamental to this elaboration is the conception of vocational learners as negotiators who manage the control and conduct of their work participation through sets of values that are transacted as working and learning practices. These transactions may be viewed not so much as bargaining or deal making that bring worker and workplace together in agreement and collaboration. Rather, these transactions may be viewed as continuing processes of creating and discovering mutualities that unite worker and workplace as sites of personal development and work practice change. Understanding workers as negotiators who generate value for themselves and their work, enables their participation and learning to be seen as negotiated practice, emergent as both process and product of the self-managed transactions in which they engage. From an examination of qualitative data collected with a variety of workers engaged in work based VET programs, the paper seeks to explore how such understandings may offer ways of conceptualising workplace learning as a transactive process that realises worker and workplace as consonant. In this way the paper helps clarify how the personal participative practices of workers can be understood more fully within the subject centred approach to vocational learning.*

## The subject centred approach

There is a need to understand more fully the nature of workers' personal enactment of the participative practices that constitute their work and learning experience. Questions such as, who is the learner, how do they personally and meaningfully engage in learning and what skills and understandings do they develop and enact through this engagement are fundamental to this understanding. This is equally true of formally structured vocational education and training and learning that is incidental to regular work practice. Addressing these kinds of questions is a means of better understanding learners and thereby better supporting and facilitating vocational learning. By doing so, researchers and educators have taken what could be called a 'subjective turn' to focus on the person of the learner as the locus of learning success and support. This turn is a move away from a focus on predominantly situational factors as the primary mediators of learning. This turn is most visible in work learning research from the sociocultural constructivist perspective (see for example, Billett,

Fenwick & Somerville (Eds.) 2006). From this perspective, learning and work are conceptualised as psycho-social practices. That is, learning and work are both psychological and social accomplishments of culturally engaged individuals whose personal practices mediate and are mediated by the contexts in which they participate. Learning, like work, is a relational and interdependent practice. Learning is both a personal and a social practice. It is the means by which people actively engage in simultaneous self and social transformation (Lave & Wenger 1998, Billett 2008).

This paper seeks to advance understandings of the personal participative practices of vocational learners from this person or 'subject centred' perspective. The paper does this through an exploration of the concept of 'negotiation'. This concept is often used in sociocultural research literature on work and learning to capture the nature of learners' interactive processes at work. The paper argues that 'negotiation' is under theorised, that is, too generally and ambiguously used in vocational learning research. Drawing on some findings of a research project focussed on the participative practices of workers as vocational learners, the paper suggests that more fully understanding how workers enact their participation in work and thereby learn, may be achieved by more fully elaborating 'negotiation' and accounting for the personal subjective bases on which learners negotiate their work and learning practices. Such an understanding could better assist those who plan and support vocational learning.

### **Negotiation – elaborating a useful ambiguity**

Workers are always active learners and the learning as practice theories that generate from this perspective variously capture this reality with slightly different conceptualisations of the learner. For example, Smith (2006) presents the vocational learner as an epistemic manager. This conceptualisation equates to the learner necessarily and purposefully managing all kinds of personal and contextual resources that mediate their work practices. For example, choosing how much and when to accord attention to the boss, how much credence to place in the experience and opinions of fellow workers and when and how to work quickly to meet delivery deadlines are personal work and learning practices that Smith (2006) notes as self-managed. Casey (2006) presents worker-learners as self-creating subjects who through work can enact their desires and imperatives for better personal conditions. Through these personal enactments, workers can achieve the required social reconceptualisation of workers beyond current and limited human resource and organisational utility concepts that deny personhood. Vahasantanen and Billett (2008) in examining the nature of vocational teachers' work and their need of meeting the demands of rapidly changing work practices, describe such teachers as negotiators of professional identity and personal strategists who deploy a range of resources in their active reshaping of themselves and their work. And similarly, Hanninen and Etelapelto (2008) describe health care workers as self-empowering, expanding the boundaries of their engagement in work as they learn to strengthen their personal agency through work practice. In each of these cases it is the subject, the person of the worker in practice, who is accounted as the locus of learning. It is their actions, their understandings, their deployment of the resources that constitute their work that is the primary mediator of vocational learning. It is this focus on the person of the work learner as the source of understanding engagement in learning that constitutes the 'subjective turn' in vocational education and training research. The premise is simple.

If we can better understand how workers personally engage in vocational learning then we can better understand how to provide for and facilitate that learning.

So how do workers as vocational learners, formally or incidentally, engage in their practice? In answer to this question, a key term that emerges from the sociocultural literature that underlies the subject centred approach to vocational learning theory is 'negotiation' (see for example Lave & Wenger 1991, Solomon 1999, Billett 2006). This literature proposes that what workers 'do' is negotiate their participation in the cultural practices that constitute their work and learning. The term thereby becomes a means of capturing the interactivity of participative practice. To work and to learn means to interact meaningfully with the diversity of personal and social resources that comprise the cultural activity of working and learning. For the individual worker, these interactions are many, simultaneous and often competing – with bosses, with tools, with colleagues, with production processes, with customers, governments, new information, personal preferences, aspirations and incapacities, etc. Negotiation as such becomes a broad and abstracted term that captures the relational interdependence of the worker and their workplace. Workers' participation is co-participative - all activity is interactivity, with the micro, the macro, the self, the other - and thereby all activity is negotiated.

Despite its meanings as an abstracted term that realises the connectedness of all cultural resources (interdependence) and the diversity of varying levels of influence that hold those connections together (relational), negotiation remains an under theorised term – too ambiguous to be more than a vague explanation of 'how' workers meaningfully engage in their work and learning practice. Generically, the term carries meanings of conciliation and compromise that mark processes of discussion and sharing that can lead to agreement and mutual benefit – referred to as integrative negotiation where all parties make perceptible gains (Saner 2005). By contrast, negotiation carries meanings of distrust and deceit as adversaries meet in contest to secure advantage by defeating opposing powers and dominating resources – referred to as distributive negotiation where one party's gain is another party's loss (Saner 2005). Further, negotiation carries meanings of insightful manoeuvring by deploying sharply honed skills or intuitive capacities that master circumstance and opportunity – a navigation or procedural conceptualisation. However interpreted, negotiation is a highly evocative term that has many connotations. Significant within these is the connotation of transaction, where the value of resources, whether psychological or material, tangible or intangible, is exchanged or transformed, reinterpreted or re-valued by interactive process. These generic connotations are important sources of meaning that shape understandings of vocational learning as psycho-social practice in and through work. In part, they are important indications of the kinds of actions and strategies individuals enact through their engagement in the participative practices of their work. Individual workers discuss, share, withhold, compete and construe in unique person dependent ways. As such, a central meaning within these generic connotations is the subjectification of interaction. That is, the rightful personalising of work and learning as uniquely purposeful effort undertaken by workers within the constraints of workplaces where rules and regulations and productivity demands often subjugate the needs and rights of workers (Fenwick 2006).

In different ways in the vocational learning theory literature, these generic connotations are drawn upon to support numerous assertions about workers and their

learning practices. It is important to problematise and interrogate these generic meanings, to overcome the ambiguity the term 'negotiation' carries. For example, consider the use of the term in this claim - "both the process and legacy [of learning] are shaped by negotiations, acts of recognition, mutuality and orientation between the personal and the social" (Billett & Smith 2006: 142). There is an implication here that acts of recognition, mutuality and orientation could be aspects of negotiation or additional to it. Consider also, that people "enter their interactions with independent and sometimes conflicting agendas that are resolved through a process of identity negotiation" (Swann 1987:1038). Here there is the suggestion that having an agenda is prerequisite to negotiation and that personal internal conflict can sometimes be such an agenda. Again, consider this claim - "The work of identity negotiation is understood as ongoing and pervasive. This means that the subject's self is constantly renegotiated in relation to experiences, situations and other community members" (Etelapelto & Saarinen 2006:159). Here there is the indication that negotiation does not stop, it is a continuing process that accommodates change as part of its verisimilitude. In each of these cases the implications and various meanings associated with the term 'negotiation' are not explicitly stated. Rather, they remain ambiguities within the generic connotations of the term, vague aspects of personal interactivity that are swept up in efforts to highlight the social nature of work and learning practices as sources of vocational knowledge and identities.

Some uses of the term 'negotiation' elaborate the qualities of personal interactivity more fully than others. For example, in a critical consideration of 'culture' and 'difference' as key concepts within workplace learning discourse, Solomon (1999) uses the term in its rich generic sense of bringing together, of interactively enabling new combinations and understandings of formerly unconnected and disparate features of workers and work. Doing so, Solomon (1999) asserts, generates new and greater benefits of acknowledging and valuing diversity and difference as the norm of workplace culture and learning. Learning in the workplace may then be understood "as a concept of 'repertoire' rather than as a developmental concept. - This view of learning suggests collaborative learning relationships that involve dialogues and negotiations" (Solomon 1999:130). The kinds of personal work activities that identify learning through dialogue and negotiation are summarised as including; explicitly comparing and contrasting experience and language in different contexts, examining relationships and how representations of meaning operate, problematising encounters and broadening communication (Solomon 1999:130). So to understand work and learning as a 'repertoire' of diverse peoples, roles, tasks and processes, Solomon (1999) uses the term negotiation to explicitly advance a comprehensive set of actions and interactions workers undertake. Acknowledging and understanding these actions is necessary to conceptualising work and learning as complex psycho-social practice.

Equally however, the range of meanings the term negotiation carries can diffuse or weakly specify the kinds of activities that constitute learning and working as social practice. Differently from Solomon (1999), Lave & Wenger (1991) use the term 'negotiation' to denote shared understandings and goals in the workplace. This sharing emerges from initially different and then common processes of meaning making and communication, as novices, through their participation, become more fully-fledged members of a vocational community of practice. The processes of becoming more central members of the community enable the construction of mutual agreements about the meaning and method of participating in their vocational

community of practice. “Participation is always based on situated negotiation and renegotiation of meaning in the world” (Lave & Wenger 1991:51) and “participation in social practice is the fundamental form of learning” (Lave & Wenger 1991:54). So, to understand work and learning as situated practice based in ‘legitimate peripheral participation’, Lave and Wenger (1991) use the term negotiation to advance a very generalised conception of the sociocultural processes that bring together the person, their knowing and their community membership as mutually constitutive in work. Relative to Solomon’s (1999) use of the term, Lave and Wenger (1991) are less explicit about the kinds of activities that identify negotiation but rely equally on its generic richness to carry the foundational meanings of their understanding of learning in and through work as social practice.

So the term ‘negotiation’ stands as a rich generic description of interactive practice that goes some way to explaining how workers engage in the personal efforts of bringing themselves and the myriad of cultural resources they operate within, into some form of personal enactment that constitutes their participation. Something they must and will do out of sheer necessity, by virtue of their presence in the activity (Smith 2006). In capturing this, ‘negotiation’ acknowledges that learning, like work, is fundamentally and always co-participative practice, based in personal and social interdependence, and that workers, as partners with all that comprises their experience, are influential in the processes and outcomes that generate from this activity. However, because of the capacity to generalise interactivity and as illustrated by the examples above, the term remains ambiguous, too inexplicit about ‘how’ workers engage in their practice. ‘Negotiation’ is under theorised and requires greater elaboration to support a fuller understanding of the personal contributions of the individual to the psycho-social practices of work and learning.

### **Examining work practice as negotiation**

In efforts to understand more fully the personal contributions of workers to the negotiation that constitutes their participation in work and vocational learning, research was undertaken with four groups of three workers (all of whom were doing different work) from four different workplaces. Of the twelve workers, eight were active in formally structured vocational learning pursuits that related directly to their work. Of these eight, some were engaged in formal vocational qualification studies that had a direct bearing on their capacity to retain their current employment. Two of these were; Hugh, a junior firefighter part way through a Diploma of Fire Science he is required to complete within three years to remain a firefighter and Haydon, a professional personal fitness trainer who had to complete annual professional development to retain his licence to practice.

The research was conducted over an 18 month period and sought to explore the kinds of personal practices that each of the workers enacted through their usual work and how these could be understood as learning practices that evidence the relational and interdependent activities of participation. A particular focus was the agency of the individual as the driver of learning practices and how this might be understood as residing in the negotiations of personally engaging in daily work. The simple guiding question of the project was – how do individuals negotiate their learning at work? The workers, all voluntary participants in the project, were interviewed five times. The extensive semi structured interviews were supported by observations and this data,

interview transcripts and observation notes, was analysed using open coding methods. Some of the findings from this project are outlined below. Some of the data from the two participants noted is used to illustrate a central theme that emerges from the findings of the project. That is, if vocational learners' personal contributions to their learning practices are to be understood in terms of negotiation, that understanding needs to account for the transactive nature of negotiation as the revaluing of specific, if not all, sociocultural resources that constitute work. And particularly, it needs to account for the subjective bases that identify the learner's perspective of those transactions. These subjective bases are the personal values and meanings that underpin learners' enactment of their personal participative practices.

### **Negotiated work and learning practices – two scenarios.**

There are numerous ways to account for vocational learning as transactions and so identify the personal values, the subjective bases, of the vocational learner. Simplistically, many of these emerge from notions of 'trade' or 'bargaining' at the heart of business understandings of human resources and human capital. For example, novices exchange their time and effort now for the gains and benefits of expertise that follow. Similarly, accepting employer initiated change in one area of work may support employee initiated change in another. In these ways the interactive partners that 'negotiate' participative practice are the familiar and contested dualities of 'now and then' and 'them and us' that mark aspects of the relational interdependence of work and learning. However, these simple separations are not sufficient to identify the subjective bases of personal learning practices that constitute negotiated engagement in vocational learning. What follows is a brief outline and consideration of the work practices of Hugh and Haydon. Each scenario is examined within the question – how may work practices be considered negotiated vocational learning practices that account for the subjective bases on which they are transacted?

Hugh is a fire fighter. He is undertaking a three year vocational Diploma as part of his normal work. He describes that work in simple terms – "*to squirt the wet stuff on the hot stuff*" – and in so doing glosses over the dangers and complexity of his vocational practice and the rigours of training that support his accomplishment of that practice. One essential task of that practice is entering burning buildings for search and rescue, reconnaissance and extinguishment. This extremely dangerous aspect of his work is supported by specific pieces of equipment that importantly include breathing apparatus, commonly referred to as BA. BA is made up of many different parts that include face masks, gas valves and lines, air tanks, back pack and strapping. All these parts are regulated and managed by stringent protocols to ensure their full and correct functioning at all times.

The importance of BA is indicated by the management system that regulates its operation and the extensive training that fire fighters must undertake in the use and maintenance of this equipment. So important is BA that the Fire Service tasks and rosters specific highly experienced personnel to commission, test and maintain the equipment. Subsequently, fire fighters, when rushing to secure their kit in response to an emergency call out, can do so with the confidence and knowledge that their BA is fully operational and ready for them to undertake their work safely.

Hugh's approach to BA is far more personal and demanding than the Fire Service protocols require. He states -

*"That's my friend, I need that, so I don't care what station I'm on, where I am, I always test my own BA set at the start of every shift, then I know it's done. Here they're a whole lot more – slack. It's not a nice thing to say, but sorry, the systems in place aren't as strictly enforced."*

Hugh is doing more than unilaterally deciding how to enact his personal practice. He exercises his agency to negotiate his practice within the constraints and affordances of his work. In Billett's (2008) terms, there is a distinct relational interdependence between Hugh's agency to enact his preferred practice and the agency of the Fire Service to accommodate this preference – notwithstanding that the Fire Service would see no need of Hugh to do this. Hugh can be said to have negotiated his participation on the basis that it requires his personal testing and maintenance of his BA equipment.

The personal values that are transacted through this negotiation are more complex than this simple employee initiated negotiation suggests. In further interview, Hugh states he has had experience of BA not being fully functional when it should have been. He was taught earlier, in Fire Service training undertaken overseas before coming to Australia, to take responsibility for his BA equipment and check and service it at the start of every shift. He knows of colleagues who have not been able to deploy in an emergency situation because their BA air tank was empty. He knows the dangers of BA equipment failing or faltering during his duties.

From these personal perspectives, these subjective bases, Hugh's negotiation of his participation involves interactions with his past and its legacy of prior learning, the fellow fire fighters on whom his work depends and the systems and protocols that regulate his practice. These interactions can be seen to transact a variety of values that include personal safety, justice, experience, reliance on self and others, trust and confidence – and not as static or personally isolated values that identify Hugh as an individual, but rather as mutualities that define the firefighting work. His capacity to be safe and confident in the equipment that supports his work is negotiated, not simply accepted. Similarly, his capacity to trust his colleagues is negotiated as his engagement in ensuring his equipment is fully functional, not simply accepted as tasks that should have been completed faultlessly by others. So, in negotiating his engagement in the specific practice of checking his BA, Hugh can be seen to be transacting sets of values that are fundamental to his personal practice. In doing this, that is, transacting his personal values through the work and learning practices, Hugh is also generating the mutualities or shared values that underpin Fire Service work. In these ways, Hugh's personal contributions to the work and learning that constitute his vocational practice can be seen as his negotiated engagement in participative practices that support his priorities, his subjective bases.

Haydon is a personal fitness trainer who must undertake professional development to maintain his licence to practice. Courses that satisfy these requirements are run by accredited training organisations within the government regulated fitness industry and he must take at least two per year. Haydon describes his work as a constant source of vocational learning -

*"you're always consistently learning and new things pop up at work all the time with different clients and what they want to achieve. Sometimes you've got to go back and do a little bit more research into some things if something comes up. Its necessary*

*learning. Its learning that you need to do your job properly and learning that you need to do your job safely as well.”*

Additional to the professional development requirements, Haydon lists a diversity of influences as sources and drivers of the learning that is essential to his vocational practice. These include clients, the owners, managers and operational systems of the host gymnasium from which he works, other trainers and gym staff, ever changing fitness equipment with its service staff and literature, his business and its functional demands and his personal interests and creative imaginings. Each of these distinct influences are the learning and participative resources on which his work depends. Each of them is an interactive partner in the negotiations that constitute his practice.

For clients, Haydon is the supportive expert who tailors their person specific training programs. *“Every client is different, in so many ways, and every session with a client is different”* and this difference demands unique and highly personalised responses that are designed and refined through constant on-going consultation with the client. To meet these demands, Haydon draws on his expertise and the many resources to which he has access. Important amongst these are his highly developed personal learning skills established through years of higher education and vocational training studies. Throughout the interviews, Haydon speaks of research undertaken to support his work with young people suffering arthritis, pregnant women, the obese and those recovering from surgery. This work is illustrative of the continuing learning that is required to support his vocational practice and the fundamental aspects of negotiating with clients, personal contacts (such as physiotherapists and other health professionals) and numerous other information sources.

The array of negotiations that constitute Haydon’s practice, even when viewed only in the interactions with a specific client, indicates the complexity of mediating influences that Haydon is actively managing during his work and learning. He is, by virtue of the position and demands of knowledgeable expert in his dealings with his clients, exercising his agency in these negotiations and privileged in the capacity this affords him to enact his subjective priorities. He acknowledges this when he states - *“if I didn’t want to do something, something I didn’t like doing myself, then I probably wouldn’t do it at all - and that’s probably helpful to the client as well, because, if I didn’t like doing it then I’d probably do a half, half-assed job of it – so, it’s not going to benefit them”*

The personal values transacted through Haydon’s negotiations of his learning needs relative to his client’s individual requirements are far more complex than the surface ‘I only do what I want to do’ sentiment expressed above. Haydon is a caring service provider who works hard to understand and meet the needs and aspirations of his clients. This is his work, and by it he transacts values of care and concern, respect, due diligence, that results follow from directed effort and that motivation is founded on personal preference. In transacting these values as his negotiated vocational practice, Haydon is enacting his subjective priorities as both personal sets of values and client shared sets of values, or mutualities, that emerge from his negotiated engagement in his work. His work demands this. He cannot ignore his client. Similarly he cannot completely indulge his personal preferences. He cannot risk client safety, client satisfaction and thereby his reputation and his business. He states - *“The main reasons for learning at work are, number one, to get results for clients because you’ve got to keep learning to stay motivated for your clients and also*

*learning new things, learning new exercises or drills or things that you can give to your clients so then they can get best results. That's the reason for learning. I think other reasons are just to keep yourself interested and keep your mind, keep your brain, working so you don't become stale. If you become stale then your business will be affected, ultimately."*

The subjective bases from which he enacts his practice are more than evident – and more than personal. From the transactions of his personal values, the subjective bases of his work, emerge mutualities, shared sets of values, processes and outcomes that are negotiated with clients and enacted as his personal contributions to the work and learning practices that identify his vocational practice.

### **Transaction and values**

As Hugh and Haydon illustrate by their personal participative practices, 'negotiation' is very useful for identifying and capturing some of the complexities and qualities of the interactions that underpin work and learning. Interactions with equipment, procedures, colleagues and workplace norms, clients and their needs and aspirations are relationally and interdependently enacted as vocational practices on the subjective bases of personal preferences, prior learnings and expectations, what Billett (2008) would describe as the ontogenetic legacy of previous engagements in sociocultural activity. These subjective bases may be seen as personal values that evidence the things, the ways and means, people care about themselves and others and what they do in their work. Hugh and Haydon are very clear about what they care about and are very clear about how this influences their work practices.

When the concept of negotiation is elaborated to illuminate what and how individuals contribute to their work and learning, the aspect of negotiation as transaction needs to be addressed. Transaction brings the concept of value to the accommodation of resources that marks negotiation as a viable interpretation of social interaction. At the most fundamental level of its meanings, "negotiation is a process whereby two or more parties seek an agreement to establish what each shall give or take, or perform and receive in a transaction between them" (Saner 2005:17). However, such a simple understanding of the term does not acknowledge that resources are not simply exchanged or transferred, but are transformed, revalued, through their becoming transacted. As Hugh and Haydon illustrate, the resources they bring to the negotiations that constitute their work can be seen as their subjective bases, their personal values and these are transformed into work practices that become evidence of new sets of values, negotiated or shared values that mark the transaction enacted. The notion of transaction enables the value of the resources transformed through social interactions such as work and learning to be identified and accounted – not simply as exchanged, but as transformed into mutualities or shared values that are enacted as vocational practices. As Hugh and Haydon demonstrate, they enact their engagement in work and learning in their own personal ways and thereby realise their vocational practice, not as something solely unique but as something accomplished through negotiations with the resources of their activity – themselves, their co-workers, their clients, etc..

Understanding the person and practice of the learner as the locus of vocational learning success and support can be well served by conceptions of the learner as a

negotiator – but only when the concept of negotiation is elaborated beyond a simple abstract term for relational interaction or a metaphor for the exchange of sociocultural resources. One way of achieving this elaboration is to utilise the idea of transaction that sits at the heart of understandings of negotiation. When the personal values of the individual worker are viewed as sociocultural resources that are transacted through the negotiations that constitute work and learning, the personal participative practices of the learner are more clearly illuminated. These personal participative practices can be seen as both the personal enactment of personal values and the social realisation of shared values that define both work and learning as interactive psycho-social accomplishments. As Hugh and Haydon demonstrate, the person is not separate to their vocational practice. They are the subjective base from which that practice is negotiated.

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