EXPLORING NOTIONS OF TRANSACTING PERSONAL PRACTICE
AND WORK LEARNING

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Abstract
The sociocultural perspective advances learning in and through work as the process and product of workers’ situated participation in practice. Such participation is always active, by varying degrees of intentionality and directionality that represent levels or kinds of workers’ engagement in the activities and events that characterise their practice. Further, the nature of engagement in work practice is transformation: nothing is static, nothing remains the same. At its simplest, workers are always in the constant transformational state of doing something. The something they are doing is always visible in some form or other as occupational practice that is historically founded, collectively defined and socially produced albeit through the personal and often idiosyncratic enactment of that practice. This paper focusses on the transformational nature of ‘doing’ work and its description and explanation as learning. Drawing on concepts of agency and Dewey’s ideas of transaction the paper explores and discusses ways of making the transformational qualities of workers’ personal work practices more visible as improved awareness of how change is enacted as learning through work and what changes are emergent as evidence of workers’ learning.

These discussions draw on data and findings from a research project that examined the personal work practices of twelve workers. This ethnographic research comprised extensive semi-structured interviews and observation sessions with each of twelve workers over an 18 month data collection period. The research focused on workers’ self-description and explanation of the particular ways they went about their work, the purposes and outcomes accomplished through their personal practice and the kinds of personal and situational changes they accounted as evidence of their learning. Data samples from the interview transcripts of one of the three fire fighters, who participated in the research, are used to illustrate the complex integration of personal and contextual factors that accomplish the transformations of person, place and practice that are the evidence of learning in and through work.

Introduction
The sociocultural perspective advances work-learning as the process and product of workers’ situated participation in practice (e.g., Lave & Wenger 1991, Engestrom 2001, Fuller & Unwin 2004, Billett 2006). Such participation is always active, by varying degrees of intentionality that represent levels or kinds of workers’ engagement in the activities and events that characterise their practice (Billett & Smith 2006). That is, workers, for example, are sometimes effort fully engaged and
at other times indifferent to the requirements of work, pursue and yet resist improved conditions, can and do find life-wide meaning and purpose through their work, and may or may not find synergies and alignments among their personal occupational goals and those of their workplace (Noon & Blyton 2007). Further, the nature of engagement in work practice is, inevitably, change or transformation: nothing remains the same (Wertsch 1998) as the constant state of flux that is human activity traverses the moments of time, purpose and space in and by which it is enacted. At its simplest, workers are always in the constant transformational state of doing something. The something they are doing is always visible in some form or other as occupational practice: equipment is being utilised, information processed, procedures enacted, materials reshaped, etc. Equally, such practices are historically founded, collectively defined and socially produced albeit through the personal and often idiosyncratic enactment individual workers bring to their work practices (Smith 2008). It is this ‘doing’, this socio-personal practice of work, that is described and explained as learning through the many personal, material, cultural and social changes work accomplishes.

This paper focusses on the transformational nature of ‘doing’ work and its description and explanation as learning. More specifically, this paper explores and discusses individuals’ work-learning as the transaction of personal practice. It considers that within the visible activities of workers’ occupational practice, some elements of agency (i.e., individuals’ distinctly personal contributions to collective practice) and the transactions that identify these practices can remain invisible and unaccountable as significant resources enacted. Failure to acknowledge and account for these resources can reduce the capacity of the sociocultural perspective of work-learning to sufficiently describe and explain such learning as participative practice.

The paper advances its exploration through the following sections. From this introduction, the conceptual bases of agency and transaction are outlined. These bases are foundational of ethnographic research conducted with twelve workers from four different workplaces and across a range of occupational practices. Findings from the research drawing on specific data illustrative of the personal work practices and experiences of one of the workers are outlined. The paper concludes in discussion of these findings as indicative of how acknowledging and accounting for the transformations enacted can better support learning awareness through making visible more of the valuable resources that constitute work-learning.

**Agency**

Generally, agency is the essential quality of human activity that simultaneously endorses individuality as both a personal and a collective sociocultural practice. ‘I’ and ‘you’ are ‘we’ are distinct yet inseparable. Our being in the world identifies us as people who “have the powers of critical reflection upon their social context and of creatively redesigning their social environment, its institutional or ideational configurations, or both” (Archer 2000: 308). From the ‘I’ perspective, personal agency conceptualises the enactment of the self-in-action and the capacities and
impacts such actions generate as evidence of individuals’ accomplishing some control and influence over what they do and how they do it. At work this enactment is always a collective practice and, therefore, always a social accomplishment as individual workers’ efforts and intentions, however significant or effective, cannot be considered outside the context in which they are enacted (Etelapelo & Saarinen 2006, Edwards, 2005). From the ‘we’ perspective, collective agency conceptualises joint-activity as the coming together of resources that accomplish what individuals alone cannot. As solidarity or conflict, the processes and outcomes of shared endeavour shape the relational bases on and from which activity progresses. At work, the team is only as good as its cohesion enables, the project only as good as the resources and support it can secure and the system, its structures and performance, are only as effective as its interdependencies hold and integrate the procedures by which it operates (Webber & Donahue 2001, Evans & Davis 2005). So, the individual cannot act on their world without the necessary involvement of being in and of a context that constitutes them in relationship with others. Equally, that context cannot accomplish its purposes without the interdependent actions of the individuals by which it is comprised.

Hence, workers’ agency is relational and interdependent (Edwards 2005, Billett 2006), emergent in the push and pull of competing and collaborating personal and social preferences and presses to action. Thereby, workers’ agency is bounded by its being situated in the specificities of the relations and interdependencies enacted (Evans 2007). Equally, workers’ agency is always promising of the new, the innovative, and the different, as the possibilities inherent in every moment (Wertsch 1998) manifest as “improvisations [that] are the openings by which change comes about” (Holland et al 1998: 18). Therefore, agency, as it may be identified in the personal actions of any individual worker, is contingent on and in negotiations among i) the occupational or vocational norms and expectations of a situated practice that defines specific work, ii) the colleagues, tools and systems that support that work and iii) the person of the worker who activates that work as personal practice.

As Wertsch (1998) asserts, action is influence - it mediates what is to come and is mediated by what has been. That is, to act is to contribute to the way things are and thereby change things from what they were. As such, all action is transformative. Personal agency is the concept that captures and locates this form of transformative power, whether weak or strong, within the individual and their practices. To examine personal agency in and for work is to examine individuals in action and so become engaged in at least three fundamental and concurrent considerations. They are; ‘who’ is the individual worker and ‘how’ is their individuality enacted through ‘what’ they do. These considerations raise issues about understanding the ‘self’ as a personal and social being who is always engaged in the pursuit of substantiating themself and the cultural experience in which they are participating. These issues go to questions about the multiple and simultaneous subjectivities of the agent (e.g., their roles, identities, aspirations, continuities of personhood, etc.), the relational properties of all the negotiations among these aspects of self (e.g., now colleague,
also friend, then spouse, once novice, now more expert, still learning, etc.) and their realisation in enactments of self (e.g., purposeful, indifferent, unintentional, etc). These are issues about the person and praxis of self. Here, such issues are captured in the conception of worker as individual and agentic self-in-action. The individual worker is a unique human being, always in a state of “becoming ... never unchanging and always social” (Jarvis 2006: 5). So, the self-in-action is a socio-personal being, uniquely enacting themselves (and all this entails) in and through the collective activities in which they participate, not as passive representations of a social position, but as agentic transformers of the practices that identify them. Efforts to understand what initiates and directs workers’ learning in participative practice will be more complete when more of those practices are visible and open to the scrutiny of reflection and analysis.

**Transaction**

Making more visible the motivations and relationships that identify workers in action requires critically examining the nature of their participation. How is participation enacted and what qualities of engagement contribute to and can be considered as learning practices? For many work-learning theorists, such questions are addressed through concepts of interaction. Hence, workers enact their personal work and learning practice as co-participants, for example, through cooperating or competing for access to resources, reluctantly or willingly engaging with others, being coerced, guided or invited into learning opportunities (Billett 2001). Alternatively, workers enact their practice through ‘knotworking’ as responsibilities for and coordination of the integrated tasks that constitute their work-learning are shared as all participants are accountable for their collective efforts (Engestrom 2001). And differently, workers negotiate their practice as they make the arrangements, debate the understandings and generate the purposes that are foundational of their activities across domains ranging from immediate tasks to life-wide identity formation (Wenger 1998). Such forms of interaction enable different perspectives on how workers are connected and disposed to the multiple resources (e.g., people, processes, materials, tools, etc.) that comprise their work practices. However, the concept of interaction, as much as it can account for the purposeful connection among resources bound in activity, always implies their separation outside the activity that brings them together. Interaction is, essentially, a concept of separation.

Interaction conceptualises individuals’ engagement ‘with’ - others, resources, context, ‘with’ their social environment. However, more than this, individuals’ engagement with their environment is a practice ‘of’ environment and cannot be separated from it. Practice does not mediate between the person and the environment. Rather, practice is evidence of the unity that is person-environment, a unity that Dewey and Bentley (1975: 109) describe as “the organism-in-environment-as-a-whole”. In work, that unity can be described as the unity of person, place and practice that is work and is made visible as the self-in-action. So, workers are more than always engaged in their work or with the resources that comprise their work
context or environment. Rather, they are always of their environment: not simply active or interactive within it, but inseparably part of the activity that is the environment. And that environment is always in transformation (Dewey & Bentley 1975).

For Dewey and Bentley (1975), the activity that characterises the unity of the environment and its continuous transformation is transaction: all action is transaction. Dewey and Bentley (1975) employ different perspectives to explain the dynamic nature of this holistic understanding of lived experience and the transactions by which it is made visible. All are illustrations of transaction as the conceptualisation of the processes by which humanity, as knowledge and meaning, as culture and activity, as person and relationship are enacted in the changes that are observable as action. For example, from understandings of ecology, “organisms do not live without air and water … they live, that is, as much in processes across and “through” skins as in processes “within” skins” (Dewey and Bentley 1975: 128).

People do not interact with air and water. Rather, the air is transacted as breath. It is always both inside and outside, always simultaneously of the organism and the environment as medium in and by which the organism transacts its living. Through being transacted as breath, the air is transformed, as is the organism and the environment. The meanings of all these transformations are observable only in the transactions that enact the transformations. The air is now a mixture of gases drawn in to sustain life, now chemically separated through cellular activity as oxygen, nitrogen, hydrogen, now deployed throughout the body by the circulatory system, now expelled in another form by exhalation to be taken up again through plants, wind, water, through yet other processes that continually transform ‘the organism-in-environment-as-a-whole’ as the flow of transactions continues.

Similarly, from the understandings of commerce,

... a trade, or commercial transaction … determines one participant to be a buyer and the other a seller. No one exists as buyer or seller, save in and because of a transaction in which each is engaged. Nor is that all; specific things become goods or commodities because they are engaged in the transaction … Moreover, because of the exchange or transfer, both parties (the idiomatic name for participants) undergo change; and the goods undergo at the very least a change of locus by which they gain and lose certain connective relations or “capacities” previously possessed. (Dewey & Bentley 1975: 270, Italics in the original)

So what belonged to one, now belongs to another, what was valued by one has now been re-valued by the other through the transaction that identifies their activity. Similarly, human action, in all its forms, generates and creates the transformations identifiable as new or different ideas, relationships and resources. In the case of farming wheat, the transaction of tilling turns the ground into a cultivated field, the transaction of planting turns the cultivated field into a crop, the transaction of harvesting turns the crop into grain and the transaction of milling turns the grain into flour that will in turn become bread as the transaction of baking brings yet other
actions and different resources to the making of food, to the transformation of all that is transacted. Just as transaction transforms the resources of activity so it transforms those who enact these activities, for they are also resources, enmeshed with all resources in the dynamic flux of experience. Farmers, like all workers, are engaged in multiple transactions through their enactment of their practice. Now engaged in machinery maintenance, now in animal husbandry, now in monitoring the latest market fluctuations, the farmer is continually enacting engagement in the multiple transactions that constitute their participation in work, in location, in an agricultural industry sector, in a national economy, etc.

So the meanings of workers, their positionings in activity and the relationships these account for, their things, understandings and purposes, and bases of subsequent activities are enacted in the transactions by which they are transformed. As illustrated above, from purchaser to owner, from owner to seller to now holder of other assets that were previously more liquid, less liquid, differently valued or utilised, whatever the case may be, individuals and their practices are visible in the nature of their transactions. This paper contends that making the transactions that characterise work-learning practices more visible is necessary to understandings of learning as participative practice.

Examining Personal Work Practice

Through five semi-structured interviews and in-work observations over 18 months, twelve workers discussed their work and learning practices and the many changes and influences they experienced and accounted as significant contributions to how and why they enacted their work in the ways they did. The twelve, each engaged in different occupational practices and holding different status and authority positions, were three from each of a restaurant, a fitness centre, an information technology support group and a fire station. The ethnographic research sought to examine the simultaneity of work and learning and the capacities of the concept of negotiation to describe and explain learning in and through work as a socio-personal process of participation. The focus was on learning as it may be considered part of work practice, part of workers’ engagement in the routine activities of their work, rather than an educational intervention as might be typical of training where intents of specific instruction are enacted. A particular focus throughout was the personal perception of change (organisational, procedural, personal, etc.) and the ways in which such changes could be identified and accounted as emergent from personal practice and consequential of personal effort, intention and preferences (i.e., agency).

The extensive data collection (18 months) and substantial interview periods (from 60-90 minutes each) enabled workers and researchers to witness and reflect on an extensive range of factors that shape the conduct and meaning of personal practice at work. In the findings discussion that follows, data samples from the interview transcripts of Hugh, one of the three fire fighters who participated in the research, are used to illustrate the complex integration of personal and contextual factors that
accomplish the transformations of person, place and practice that are the substance and gravitas of learning in and through work.

**Transacting the Person in Practice: Occupational Self, Identity and Position**

The immediacy of the self-in-action, that is, the sheer presence of being in work (before questions of choices made or actions taken) carries more than a position in activity and an expectation of what should happen given the social roles and norms that identify position. The individual worker uniquely personalises any social or occupational position by their ‘who’ it is that embodies and enacts that position. Equally, the person, more than their position, activates the response(s) necessitated by their presence. Enacting this immediacy is a person dependent practice that enables a diverse range of personal and social possibilities (i.e., responses). These enactments and possibilities (potential or actual) are the evidence, the substance and influence of the person in and through the contexts and events in which they are engaged. In short, simply being present evidences personal agency and initiates the transactions of self and practice that follow.

To illustrate: Hugh is a fire fighter. He works in a large city based fire station as a full-time employee of the State Fire and Rescue Services. He has not come to this current work as a raw recruit. Rather, he has migrated from his country of birth where he had previously worked as a fire fighter after working some years as a slate tile roofer. Hugh is a large and physically powerful man who, on arrival in this country, took employment with a furniture removal company for a few years before applying and successfully joining the state fire and rescue service. As a means of securing extra income, Hugh still works part-time with the removalist company when his fire fighting shift rotations permit. In responding to questions about his declared love of the job and the kinds of explanations he has for this, he stated in some of the interviews,

*I enjoy being in the Fire Service because of the actual work, the variety of it, but also the respect that comes with the position. I mean, I first noticed it back home in my local pub. When I was just a roofer the old fellas at the top end of the bar wouldn’t particularly speak to me because I was just one of the village boys, you know, but as soon as I joined the Fire Service they all wanted to talk to me, sit down, have a pint, they would all tell me their World War stories. (Int#2)*

*If I’m at a BBQ and to answer to someone asking me what I do, I say, I’m a furniture removalist, they walk away. When I say I’m a fire fighter, then oh man, that’s interesting and they start telling you their story - because everyone’s got a fire story. They want to talk. (Int#3)*

*I’ve had 10 years experience now … and it’s up to me what I say about me and the job. It’s a job a lot of people think they could do but no they can’t. I can say what I want but you’ve got to be careful, and I think – oh, I’ve seen this before, I could say this, I could say that. You can tell by the reactions when they don’t know...*
what’s happening … There aren’t many people you can talk to about being a firey. (Int#5)

In these brief excerpts, Hugh is acknowledging something of the social origins and meanings of his work: meanings that identify him as the embodiment of a familiar and highly respected social position/occupation. Further, he reveals his personal construal of these meanings in everyday social situations away from work where his occupational practices as a fire fighter are enacted as personal practice. When Hugh enters into these situations, he enters as fire fighter, as roof tiler, as furniture removalist, as BBQ guest, as bar patron – as full participant in the occasion. It is not simply the case that a fire fighter has entered. Rather, it is the case that Hugh, the person, the unique self-in-action with all his history and legacy of past and current engagement in social activity has entered. His presence in these situations generates transactions of self and occupational practice, transactions over which he has some personal control, particularly in terms of directing the possibilities related to his work. Some of these possibilities are realised as inclusion and sharing, and a conferred status of respect and interest as he reveals himself as fire fighter. Similarly, these transactions can include exclusion and isolation as he reveals himself as furniture removalist. Yet, in as much as these possibilities attach to the diverse social positions Hugh embodies, they remain his to enact within the transactions underway. He knows, from experience both in and out of work, that there is much that could be said about ‘who he is’ and ‘what he does’ and how the complexities of these understandings intersect and collide with those outside his immediate work experience. At other times within the interviews he comments on the often incomprehensibility of the destruction and distress his work experience entails and how talking about such things is both difficult and often inappropriate.

So, the trajectory and legacy of such transactions wait on the choices and decisions participants will enact as personal practice and, in Hugh’s case, additional occupational practice. We can only speculate on what Hugh will discuss with the old fellows at the top of the bar. We can, however, be certain that Hugh’s personal presence has generated this particular interaction made all the more salient by his having previously been just another labouring lad in the village. And similarly, at the next BBQ, will Hugh choose to identify himself as a fire fighter or a furniture removalist and what factors will influence this decision? These become important considerations because Hugh’s occupational practice is transacted in these seeming casual encounters as he negotiates the terrain of his, others’ and society’s understandings of the work and position of fire fighters.

Fire fighters, like furniture removalists, like roof tillers, like guests at a BBQ, are guided by personal, occupational and social norms and expectations (Holland et al 1998). These elements of sociocultural activity are, like persons and their practices, resources that are being transacted through the flow of activity that identifies them. Hugh transacts these resources through his enactment of them. He may not be
completely the subject of his practices, but he is always the complete personification of them because only he practices the way he does, only he changes the way he does. Hugh enacts his personal practice in ways that derive from his personal construal of what it means to be and work as a fire fighter, whether at the bar, at BBQs or at work.

**Transacting Practice: Goals, Aspirations and Purposes**

Hugh is keen to continue working at the large city-based fire station, instead of one of the smaller suburban stations. The constant activity of the larger city stations (there are only two) motivate him to work to secure his position both within his crew and within the station. Generally speaking, a four-member crew operates the standard pump appliance vehicle (i.e. fire truck) that attends to emergency call outs. Each of the four crew members have specific tasks and responsibilities that differentiate their roles in responding to emergencies. These roles can be identified by the seating position each takes in the vehicle. Fire fighters, through the normal course of their progression in the service, become senior fire fighters who have attained sufficient training qualifications and experience to assume any role and therefore seating position within the vehicle crew. Hugh, who has not attained this rank as yet, is limited to filling position number three in the crew and there are only two such number three positions available within the station – one per day and evening shift. To secure his place at the station and avoid transfer to a less active suburban station means making himself more flexible within the workplace. This equates to qualifying himself to take on other roles additional to the number three position. This is a difficult task given his official junior status. Hugh explains,

*I want to stay at this station and the only real way to do that is to become an all car driver. It’s something I want, so I’m pursuing it.*

Yeah well - as it is at the moment, due to my lower rank and limited time in the Fire Service, there’s only a number of places I can ride machines. In the back of a pump you get a number one and a number three … I can’t ride as number one. I can only ride as a number 3 and I’ve not made driver yet, so I can’t drive any of the vehicles apart from the control unit, Tango - that’s a Mercedes Sprinter van. So that at least allows me 2 positions that I can ride. The more positions you ride the more useful you are to the shift. So I’m pushing now to get made up on second car, Bravo, and then it’ll just be experience driving that for a few months before going up to the heavier ones. It’s just flexibility - the more useful you are, the easier it is to keep you here because they can slot you in with someone and just move you around - and it also helps the boys. If you’ve only got two blokes on the shift that drive one particular machine, well it’s only ever going to be either of those driving it - and they get stale or they might drive the same thing for months in the same position, doing the same job every day. Well some blokes don’t mind it, but some find it a bit limiting. Especially when you get a run of good fires and they’re not in a position to be wearing breathing apparatus - actually getting
in there, squirting water around – they’re back from it a little bit. You start to lose why you joined the job - you know? So it’s a combination of making yourself more useful, more flexibility and more change”. (Int#5)

Hugh’s aspirations (and their interdependence within the structural constraints and affordances of his work) are clear as he ‘pushes’ to take advantage of the opportunities the station supports. He is not content to hold position number three with its guarantee of ‘getting in there’ and directly fighting fire: something he could sustain if he accepted being sent to one of the suburban fire stations. Driving the two smaller control vehicles, Tango and Bravo (equipped with the command and communications facilities necessary to managing larger emergency responses), are not tasks that get him into the action of directly fighting fire. For Hugh, actually getting in there and fighting fires is his primary reason for being a fire fighter. The fundamental importance of this is a constant throughout Hugh’s discussion of his work. However, and importantly for Hugh, becoming a designated driver of these two vehicles is a negotiated opportunity to secure a station position by enabling his greater capacity to be deployed across other essential work tasks and roles. His increased utility may mean being in position three less often, and being more valuable at the station, more easily deployed, and thereby less likely to be rostered to less active suburban stations.

Hugh’s actions and motivations for seeking to stay at the city station evidence a range of transactions of practice through which he measures and evaluates his agency. For example, he explains himself as pushing for what is relationally possible as he transacts his aspirations. Similarly, he views himself as relatively successful following his qualifying to drive Tango, the smaller of the two control vehicles. For Hugh, pushing means finding time in a busy daily work schedule to devote to driver training without detracting from other duties, not least being a readiness to attend emergency call outs. Throughout the interviews, he discusses how he must continually initiate requests for training opportunities that will support his aspirations to remain at the station. Pushing means badgering senior station officers to set aside time, to organise contingencies and to allocate appropriately qualified staff to supervise driver training. It means being diplomatic in all of this, being careful to balance personal priorities with the capacities and interests of colleagues and work requirements. Pushing means being successful, knowing that the right balance of enacted personal and organisational objectives can secure an outcome that fits with greater personal plans. So, pushing is a relational measure, a self-appraisal of himself-in-action, that confirms a relatively high measure of personal agency that achieves personal success. This high level of agency equates to purposeful, directed personal practice that is negotiated through personal goals transacted as organisational goals. What Hugh wants and pursues is personally apprehended as what the fire service needs and affords. He transacts his personal practice through these negotiations and is transformed by the actions he takes and the accomplishments achieved. As is the fire service that now has a number three who can be additionally deployed on each of the control cars when required.
Hugh’s transaction of his personal practice, purposeful and directed by his agency, is premised primarily on the positive resonance between his intentions and the chances of their being realised within a context of high command and control protocols that resemble the strong authority structures of military culture. His practice, like that of the fire service, is transformed by transactions that identify the relationship between what he wants, what he perceives the Fire Service wants and how effectively his actions can secure parity between the two.

**Transacting the Material: Personal Tools and Occupational Practice**

The diverse work of fire fighters sometimes involves attending emergency situations in support of police. Often, these situations do not involve fire or accident but require the fire fighters’ skills of entering locked premises quickly and securing the safety of trapped or disabled inhabitants. There are different pieces of equipment that make up the fire fighters ‘kit’ in such situations. These include battering rams, heavy levers and hydraulic spreaders used to quickly remove or simply smash in doors. The most commonly used tool is the sledgehammer. Hugh explains, “at the end of the day a few good smacks with a heavy sledge hammer and most household doors come off.” (Int#4) In interview, Hugh described an incident where such circumstances and expectations applied. He recounted how he approached the entrance of a private home where police officers stood waiting for him to do what fire fighters do, hammer the door down. He stated:

> I carry a piece of milk carton plastic in my kit - no one else does. When you have to gain access - I’ve used it where there was an elderly person on the floor, there’s no damage. I’ve had the policemen look at me strangely when I’ve actually pulled it out of my pocket and popped the lock in front of them – they were gob smacked. (Int.#4)

Hugh’s personal presence at the door, in full emergency response uniform and carrying the familiar sledgehammer, the usual ‘kit’, carries all the social press of standard roles and expectations. The interaction generated by his presence in this typical work scenario is both immediate and seemingly predictable. However, from the immediacy of his presence emerges a different set of possibilities, not because a fire fighter is on the job (although this is plainly the case), but because Hugh is on the job. He does what he is supposed to do, that is gain access, and so confirms the social norms of fire fighters and their occupational practice. Additionally and most saliently, he personalises the role through his personal practice of using a piece of flexible plastic to open the door. In doing so, Hugh transacts his personal practice in ways unfamiliar to the attending police. His knowledge and use of specific density plastics for tripping particular locks, a skill learned in earlier days, stands as a person specific aspect of Hugh’s occupational practice and the transacted transformation of milk bottle into fire fighting and rescue tool.
Making Learning More Visible Through the Transactions of Work Practice

In the terms of the socio-cultural constructivist perspective, Hugh is figuring his occupational world through choices made from a position within it that is supported by his work (Holland et al. 1998). His choices and decisions, (i.e., the exercise of his agency) progress from a base of relational interdependence (Billett 2006) between his personal aspirations and the affordances of his work. As he transacts these aspirations through his personal practice, he participates more fully in his vocational community (Lave & Wenger 1991), defines more fully the objects of his learning practices as collaborative accomplishment (Engestrom 2001) and, thereby, experiences his work as the personal transformation of becoming more knowledgeable about who he is and how and why he does what he does (Jarvis 2006). Hugh the person, primarily as firefighter but also as furniture removalist, BBQ guest, etc., is engaged in an extensive range of simultaneous transactions, including; personal agency, social position, occupational and personal identity, expertise and skill development, aspirational career planning and tool making. And none of this wealth of activity, except the training directed at becoming an all car driver, is personally construed as learning. Rather, it is simply accounted as *doing my job*. For Hugh, his learning to enact his work the way he does, his learning transacted in personal practice, is predominantly invisible.

There are, however, some clearly visible aspects of this learning – and they are the transformations observed in and following from the transactions enacted. Hugh notices the changes *as soon as* he becomes a firefighter. The old men at the bar change, the guests at the BBQ change and the policemen change, become gob smacked as they and Hugh transact the personal, social and occupational practice of firefighter. Hugh’s being there brings an immediate personalisation, a unique self-in-action, with a range of possibilities that go beyond the press of social roles and expectations. Hugh demonstrates that from what could be done, whether hidden in personal potential or obvious in predictable behaviour, the self-in-action is transformed and transforming.

Describing and explaining work learning as participation in activity requires understanding how workers engage in the transactions that constitute their personal practice of work. The few illustrations of Hugh’s work practices above offer some insights into how he does what he does in work. When these transactions are made visible, that is, open to the awareness of those involved, the transformations being experienced may become equally open to awareness as the evidence of learning rather than illustrative example of simply having done something. Hence, learning, as the process and product of that experience, becomes more visible as a certain kind of transaction, a visibility generating transaction, perhaps, that is distinguishable from interaction because it simultaneously accomplishes the transformation of person, place and practice.
References


