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Learner-led and boundary free: learning across contexts

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In this paper, the contributing authors seek to extend our thinking about the nature of learning across settings. All emphasise the role played by the individual in shaping learning and consider the importance of agency in sustaining motivation for learning beyond structured settings. Kersch examines these issues in the context of workplace learning. Potter identifies a new physical site of learning – the home-school boundary – and argues that learner agency and the relationship between interest and motivation provide a useful lens through which to examine and understand young people's choices and behaviours in and out of school. Finally Pitts discusses the ways in which motivation and learner agency may be sustained across lifetimes with respect to engagement in music. In examining varying forms of learning that occur beyond the classroom, all three authors move beyond more traditional conceptualizations of learning as simply the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and instead offer a more nuanced notion of learning pertaining to the development of personal dispositions that enable effective participation in contemporary society in both work and social settings.

INTRODUCTION (Heather King)

Contemporary views of learning increasingly consider life to be one long learning journey: in every activity in which we engage we are learning and improving in our practice (O'Grady, 2013). Learning from this perspective is truly life-long in that it occurs over time, and life-deep in that it is shaped by an individual's various religious, social and moral values. It is also life-wide in the sense that an individual's experiences occur across many settings (Banks, Au, Ball, *et al.*, 2007). In contrast, however, many of the systems that have been established to support learning (for example, the formal school system) are structured in such a way that they can fail to recognize or incorporate learning that occurs outside of their established systems and beyond their predetermined curricula. In this paper, contributing authors shine a light on instances of learning that occur across contexts despite systemic boundaries. Their accounts are informed by prior empirical work investigating the ways in which individuals make sense of their experiences as they engage with new material outside of, or beyond, conventional schooling. Building from richly detailed qualitative case studies in settings from the workplace to the home-school boundary, and in motivational contexts stretching from a need to learn for work purposes to engagement in activities for personal and social reasons, the discussions developed here call for a greater valuing, and thereafter support, of learning, across multiple contexts.

Many of the papers in this volume discuss learning as a feature of social interaction (Illeris, 2007), or an act of social participation in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). However, whilst recognizing the significant role of shared experiences in acquiring joint or common understanding and skills, it is important not to lose sight of the individual's personal contribution to the learning process. Indeed,

in this paper, all three of the discussions discuss the role of an individual's motivation for engagement in learning.

For educators, workplace managers, and designers of learning environments, a key aim is to create spaces and situations wherein an individual is sufficiently motivated to complete the activity. Clearly, this is no small task, not least because motivation is a highly complex construct and is shaped by various factors. For example, closely associated with motivation is the notion of interest, itself a multi-faceted construct as Hidi and Renninger's (2006) framework on interest development makes clear. The framework comprises four sequential phases. Firstly, an experience triggers situational interest, though of course not all individuals will respond to the same trigger. For those whose interest *is* sparked, further support and further engagement may lead to the interest becoming maintained situational interest – the second phase. The third phase sees the interest becoming less transient, less dependent on affective stimuli, and less in need of external support. This third phase is thus defined as emerging individual interest, whilst the fourth and final phase is termed well-developed interest. These latter two phases are self-sustaining: the increased interest fosters the learner's internal motivation and prompts behaviours such as seeking further opportunities to engage. Not least for its role in enabling motivation, reaching phases three and four of interest development has become a key aim of many engagement efforts (Barron, 2006; Bohnert, Fredricks, & Randall, 2010; Palmer, 2010; Azevedo, 2011).

An individual's motivation may also be associated with the level of autonomy or agency they are granted when taking responsibility for their learning. The importance of agency has particular significance in many workplace situations. For example, research on professional training has led to new understandings of how

workers learn, and how they manage their own learning by building on their experiences across settings. Kersh, below, discusses these ideas further. Learner agency and the relationship between interest and motivation provides a further useful lens through which to examine and understand the choices that young people make to bridge their learning and engagement between home and school. Indeed, the combination of personal autonomy, shared interest, and motivation is made manifest in the identification of a new physical site of learning – the home-school boundary. This argument is developed further by Potter, below. Finally, whilst motivation is fostered by interest and autonomy, questions remain around the ways in which motivation for learning may be sustained across a lifetime. Discussing engagement in music, Pitts, below, examines the factors affecting the ways in which individuals develop and extend their learning across both physical and temporal contexts.

THE WORKPLACE AS A LEARNING SPACE (Natasha Kersh)

In the following discussion, I consider the notion of the learning space in the workplace. Specifically, I look at the ways in which it facilitates individual engagement and perceptions of knowledge and learning at work. In my previous research (Kersh, Waite, & Evans, 2012), I have discussed how the concept of the personal learning workspace may be considered from various perspectives. For example, the personal learning workspace can be perceived as a physical space such as an office, workshop, or laboratory. However, it can also refer to a spontaneous context where employees learn from each other's practices and experiences. Moreover, the recent expansion of modern technologies has facilitated the development of virtual learning spaces that ultimately change the boundaries of learning spaces, making them more flexible, mobile, and personalized. Finally, the

learning space can be perceived as a combination of a range of components, such as physical space, informal learning contexts, and virtual learning; and, as research indicates, employees may personalize and shape these environments, thus creating their own personal spaces (Kersh *et al.*, 2012, Evans & Kersh, 2014).

The relationships between spaces and learning have been addressed from a range of perspectives and within various disciplines. Traditionally, the concept of space has been associated with the discipline of geography; however, the writings of social theorists and sociologists such as those of Bronfenbrenner (1977), Foucault (1980), Soja (2002), and Goffman (1990) have drawn attention to the significance of the notion of space for social science research, specifically through researching issues of power and knowledge. That is, space is increasingly being seen as important with respect to the interpretation of social interactions. In exploring the notion of space and learning, social science research largely focuses on the ways that spaces are constructed through social processes (Brooks, Fuller, & Waters, 2012).

In recent years, attention has been directed to the ways in which spaces have been socially constructed as learning contexts (e.g. Evans, Hodkinson, Rainbird, & Unwin, 2006; Kersh *et al.*, 2012; Solomon, Boud, & Rooney, 2006). A substantial body of this research literature (Evans *et al.*, 2006; Malloch, Cairns, Evans & O'Connor, 2011) focuses on the role of the workplace context and the inherent characteristics of a working space. What employees learn, both as novices and experts, in the workplace and in experiences beyond the workplace, contributes to their skills and personal development. What is more, their personal workspaces enhance their effectiveness, creativity and social practices within constantly changing contemporary workplaces (Kohlegger, Maier, & Remus, 2013).

The interpretation of the workplace as a site only for work and job-specific training has been changing, especially in the last two decades. Employees are now increasingly expected to engage in a range of workplace learning and professional development activities alongside performing their immediate job roles. Such a change in the perception of the workplace has also been facilitated by the workplace learning agenda in both the UK and in international contexts (Cedefop, 2008; GRALE, 2013). Workplaces are now acknowledged as sites for learning that contribute to life-long learning, personal development and social engagement of individuals (Fuller, Unwin, Felstead, Jewson, & Kakavelaki, 2007; Heiskanen & Heiskanen, 2011; Guile, 2010).

Research seeking to understand the complex relationships and interdependencies between workplace settings and an individual's opportunity to exercise his or her agency to learn have been informed by a range of theoretical approaches including situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1998), activity theory (Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999), and social ecology (Evans, Kersh, & Waite, 2011). These theoretical approaches provide useful windows into the ways individuals can develop through a variety of work-based learning experiences. The workplace as a context for learning has also been discussed specifically in the way it may facilitate or restrict adults' learning opportunities and life chances. Evans *et al.* (2006) make the point that there is a strong interrelationship between opportunities provided by the workplace and the nature of the environment at work, which influences the way adults learn *in, for* and *through* the workplace. In their consideration, learning *in the workplace* relates to different types of learning including both formal and informal learning modes, where some of the learning takes place naturally through mentoring, interaction, and a range of work activities and experiences. The significance of learning opportunities that are accessed as part of the

employment relationship is conceptualized as learning *through the workplace*.

Learning *for the workplace* refers to learning opportunities that may be directly or indirectly related to the employment, such as formal courses or job-specific training, which may take place outside the workplace (Evans & Kersh, 2014).

Previous research (Evans *et al.*, 2006) has further indicated that workplace spaces are characterized by being both work and learning spaces where the boundaries between the two are considerably blurred. Adult learners (employees) learn at work continuously, taking on different learning opportunities, either formally or informally. The learning that occurs as the learner crosses boundaries between contexts of education, work, and other related settings has been a subject of interest in a number of national and international studies (Young, Tuomi-Gröhn, & Engeström, 2003; Guile, 2010; Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). This concept of ‘boundary-crossing’ is useful because it contributes to our understanding of the ways that learners acquire and then use their knowledge and skills.

On crossing boundaries, employees must apply their skills to new environments (e.g. Evans *et al.*, 2006; Solomon, Boud, & Rooney, 2006; Kersh *et al.*, 2011). Research suggests that engaging in learning and applying skills not only within but across a variety of contexts and spaces enables employees to develop a range of transferrable skills required by the contemporary economy and knowledge society. The nature of skills for employment is changing as employees are increasingly expected to deploy skills in more flexible and adaptable ways, and to be able to demonstrate not only job-specific skills, but also personal skills and capabilities (Evans *et al.*, 2006; Eraut, 2004). From a number of studies undertaken across different occupational sectors in a range of UK workplaces (including, for example, London Underground, care homes, Fire and Rescue Service, ship building), it is clear

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that employees are employing skills and knowledge across different contexts, environments and spaces in many different ways (Evans *et al.*, 2006; Kersh *et al.*, 2012; Kersh *et al.* 2011). In reviewing such findings, it is suggested that the use and value of tacit skills, acquired in other contexts, should be recognized as these lead to greater agency and confidence in new environments (Kersh *et al.*, 2011). Using and developing literacy and numeracy skills, for example, across various contexts – from education, to work, to family life – provides an example of how the acquisition and more active use of these skills leads to enhancing life chances and learning success (Kersh *et al.*, 2012).

Literacy and numeracy courses delivered in the workplace setting provide employees with skills that they can embed and contextualize across various settings. As employees learn new skills and exercise their agency to greater extents, they develop skills of expression, communication, collaboration and planning which will spill over into their family and the community lives (Boud & Garrick, 1999). Research (Kersh *et al.*, 2012) has demonstrated that employees who participated in literacy and numeracy workplace courses (e.g. Skills for Life) have often used their literacy and numeracy skills in their family or community life (e.g. undertaking voluntary work in local libraries, reading a bedtime story to their children, or better managing their household budgets). The data suggest that family and community settings provide opportunities for employing and developing a range of skills acquired in the course of workplace literacy and numeracy programmes, thus extending the learning space from the workplace to the home and community environments.

In summary, the consideration of workplace learning and its different configurations has underpinned the complex relationships that exist between work, learning, agency, and space. Conceptualizing the workplace as also a learning space

enhances employee agency, specifically through providing opportunities and affordances for the development of personal skills, motivations and outcomes. The learning space is thus shaped by an interplay of workplace structures, processes and context, which themselves are subject to overlaps with other contexts that extend way beyond the workplace and into other contexts.

LEARNING IN THE “THIRD SPACE” (John Potter)

In recent years, research examining learning across the home-school divide has invoked the concept of the ‘third space’ (Gutiérrez, 2008), an area between that of the official curriculum and the informal knowledge, skills and dispositions of the home or community culture. Sometimes this is a literal third space, the actual halfway house of an after-school club, museum, gallery, youth club or other such place, and sometimes this is metaphorical space (perhaps physically located within a school) identified by forms of dialogue and pedagogical strategies designed to mediate other forms of expertise and challenge dominant roles and representations of knowledge.

Much has been written about the third space in the context of technology and new media (Muller, 2003; Wegerif, 2007), in part due to the supposition that technology has a universally liberating effect on children and young people because it promotes their agency and autonomy in school settings (Buckingham, 2008). Indeed, the rhetoric of ‘digital natives’ (Prensky, 2005), which considers children to be immersed in technology, and therefore uniform and universal experts, is often used to describe the actors and activity in the third space between home and school. However, this conceptualization may be too simple (Thomas, 2011). Firstly, not all children will be universally or equally expert. White and Le Cornu (2011), for example, prefer to describe the users of this third space as digital visitors and residents rather than

experts. Secondly, viewing the third space as the location of expertise does not do justice to the transfer of skills across this boundary space between home and school.

Studying the third space of the home-school divide offers us an opportunity to understand how young people's learning and engagement shapes and is shaped by material culture and their lived experiences. A recent project studying home-school uses of technology (*Learners and Technology 7–11*, Selwyn, Potter, & Cranmer, 2008) aimed to explore these factors. Data were collected in primary schools in five settings in the UK from children in the upper age range. In order to further the aims of a project exploring issues of agency in the uses of new technology and media, the researchers involved the pupils themselves in the data collection. Thus, the researchers also collected drawings of future ICT uses by 355 pupils, conducted pupil-led focus groups, gathered online elicitation of pupil generated content, as well as collecting audio and video data generated by pupils within the School. There were a number of interesting patterns in these data with respect to skills and dispositions across all forms and these are reported in detail elsewhere (Selwyn, Potter, & Cranmer, 2010). Generally speaking, children had low expectations of the range of agency permitted with technology in school and little in the way of optimism over the ability to transfer anything meaningfully across the boundary between home and school.

Given the lack of meaningful transfer, a second project explored the potential of media production activities for enhancing agency. Such activities involve current culturally relevant forms of engagement such as film, animation and computer gaming (see the work of the DARE [Digital Arts Research in Education] Collaborative [2014], which researches digital media arts projects in the third space, such as *Playing Shakespeare, Into film: Shoot Smart – Pedagogies with Tablet*

filmmaking devices, and *Videogames and Mazes*). The findings from these studies suggest that children and young people experience higher levels of engagement when they are off-timetable, when they are working in a more playful way, and when they are asked specifically to employ skills and knowledge which are not usually admissible in school. In short, the third space provides a productive location for technology-related activities which, in turn, reveal specific kinds of dispositions towards learning.

The evidence of these and other similar projects suggests that there is a complex interplay between new media technology, the home culture, the school culture, and learning (Erstad & Sefton-Green, 2012). Unraveling this in socio-cultural terms requires time. Such projects notwithstanding, the movement of skills, dispositions and knowledge across the boundary between home and school clearly needs further exploration in light of changes brought about by the increasing use of new media technologies.

The third space between home and school, metaphorical or physical, appears to provide a boundary context for learning that promotes particular kinds of positive endeavour. However, further exploration and discussion is needed to unravel the mechanisms which appear to be the strongest generators of useful activity. Certainly, such work should avoid simple accounts of the enhancement to learning afforded by new technologies, and think instead about enhancements to contexts which promote new understandings, skills, and dispositions.

MUSICAL LEARNING BEYOND AND AFTER SCHOOL (Stephanie Pitts)

Here, I discuss the nature and value of music learning within and beyond the classroom, considering the long-term impact of formative musical experiences on life-

long engagement with arts and culture. The nature of music learning is multi-faceted, encompassing creative practice, skill acquisition on an instrument, and enculturation and deliberate learning through listening. Experiences in school vary across generations (Pitts, 2000) and even within current practice (Ofsted, 2012), and are heavily dependent on the enthusiasms of individual teachers and the institutional priority given to music, with both of these factors under threat from the low status of the subject in teacher training and in political rhetoric (Hallam & Creech, 2010). Research in music education therefore illuminates the relationship between policy, practice and life-long impact in ways that contribute to broader discussions of learning beyond the classroom.

Learning in music can take place across a wide variety of contexts: in the institutional settings of instrumental lessons or in school classroom; beyond those settings through extra-curricular music-making; privately, listening through headphones or engaging in self-taught experimenting with an instrument; and throughout life in continued listening, live music attendance, and, for a smaller proportion of the population, in ongoing singing, playing and participation. As a ubiquitous presence in society – albeit a rather more marginalized one in formal education – music truly has the capacity to be ‘life-wide, life-long and life-deep’ (Banks *et al.*, 2007).

Recent years have seen a growth in research into adults’ musical participation (e.g. Pitts, 2005; Finnegan, 2007), documenting the value and appeal of membership of a musical ensemble for adults at all stages of life, and particularly into retirement (Coffman, 2002; Perkins & Williamon, 2014).

Working towards a collective musical goal can bring intrinsic satisfaction and self-esteem to marginalized social groups (Bailey & Davidson, 2002) and stressed

professionals alike (Carucci, 2012), while also providing social and emotional support through membership of a group of like-minded people (Creech, Hallam, Varvarigou, & McQueen, 2014). There is also a smaller body of research that demonstrates the psychological and social effects of musical participation for younger players, including the building of confidence and sense of group belonging, and the reaching of shared musical goals (McGillen, 2004; Pitts, 2008).

Young people's instrumental learning has also received attention, both in documenting the sometimes erratic motivation and practice strategies of beginners (McPherson, 2005) and in tracking the learning trajectories of professional musicians – those who have invested in the 10,000 hours of practice estimated to be essential to elite performance, in music as in other disciplines (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993; Gobet, this volume). Less often considered, however, are the routes between school musical participation and life-long engagement – and these have therefore been the focus of a recent 'musical life histories' research project, *Chances and Choices* (Pitts, 2012), in which I sought to explore the long-term impact of the attitudes, skills and opportunities acquired through school musical experience. Respondents in the study were recruited through a range of music magazines published in the UK, as well as online and via word of mouth, and were asked to supply their written answers to five open-ended qualitative questions:

- 1. What kind of music was going on in your home as a child? How influential do you think this was in your development?*
- 2. What are your memories of school music? (People, activities, opportunities...)*
- 3. Who has been influential on your musical behaviour at various stages of your life?*

4. What have been the highlights of your musical life history so far?

5. Do you have any regrets about missed opportunities in music?

The 81 detailed answers received were analyzed thematically, and interpreted from a range of perspectives, including generational changes in music education, parent and teacher influences, and levels of adult involvement in music (see Pitts, 2012 for a full account of methodology). With respondents' ages ranging from 19 to 80+, the life stories encompassed huge changes in musical practices, both within school, as class lessons shifted their focus from singing, through composing, to music technology and pop music, and outside school, in the ever-increasing access to recorded music of all genres, and the growth of a teenage music culture of independent listening and self-taught pop bands.

Most striking in the responses were the lasting effects of the musical attitudes encountered in childhood, and the implicit life-long lessons about whom music was for and whether missed opportunities could be remedied later. These learnt attitudes came both from parents, whose own musical experiences were a strong factor in whether learning an instrument was seen as an encouraged or even expected childhood activity, and from teachers, whose approaches to musical selection in extra-curricular activities ranged from whole school compulsion to the apparent favouring of 'talented' individuals, to the benefit of some respondents and the exclusion of others. Older respondents, whose classroom music lessons were often limited or non-existent, nonetheless expressed strong congruence between home and school music: singing in the school choir and later joining an amateur choral society had given them lasting access to music. Other studies have shown that popular musicians can experience a similar sense of continuity through their self-generated learning (Green,

2002), so confirming in a different genre the importance of early or foundational experiences for life-long engagement.

The variety of musical routes in these life stories is an indication that the outcomes of music learning – in and out of the classroom – are not predictable: there is no guarantee of life-long musical enjoyment attached to beginning instrumental lessons by a particular age, or having parents who are themselves musicians. Nonetheless, access to a variety of musical opportunities in and out of school, within an environment of appropriate encouragement and challenge, has a life-changing effect on enough young people to warrant greater support than is usually afforded in school resourcing and curriculum planning.

These findings demonstrate the lasting influence of school music provision, and show how the attitudes and opportunities that shape life-long learning are present in student-teacher interactions and extra-curricular activities as much as (if not more than) in the formal curriculum. Engagement with music beyond the classroom plays a particularly strong role in building a sense of musical identity – mostly positive for those who are involved in such activities, but with the associated risks of excluding or alienating those who are not (Pitts, 2007). Other school subjects that spill over into voluntary clubs and activities would be interesting topics for similar investigations. Research into life-long attitudes to sport in Ireland, for example, has shown that positive experiences of sport into adolescence offer a strong foundation for continued engagement into adult life, albeit one that is challenged by life transitions and changing priorities in adulthood (Lunn, Kelly, & Fitzpatrick, 2013).

Music offers one example of the lasting effects of learning beyond the classroom, not only on individual future lives, but on the place of the arts in society and education. The value given (or not given) to music in schools speaks to the next

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generation of teachers, parents and policy-makers, and so has influence not just beyond the classroom, but far beyond education.

CONCLUSION (Heather King)

Kersh, Potter, and Pitts have offered rich descriptions of learning across contexts and beyond conventional learning spaces. Indeed, their descriptions serve to extend more traditional conceptualizations of learning as acquisition of knowledge and skills to a more nuanced notion of learning as the development of dispositions that enable effective participation in contemporary society in both work and social settings.

In particular, and in terms of future directions for research, all three contributions point to the need for a focus on learners' motivations and agency as they move from more regulated learning settings with externally set requirements to the less regulated learning settings of the home-school boundary, workspace or personal life in which more intrinsic motivations prevail. Methodologically, a key focus now must be on ways of looking beyond individual case studies and developing approaches that draw together learning experiences. Indeed, work around the notion of learning ecologies discussed by Barron in this volume are of particular use here.

Kersh's, Potter's, and Pitt's analyses of cross-contextual learning also raise important questions about the ways in which learning beyond the classroom can be supported, and how educators are trained or accredited. Whilst some work has begun in discussing the professional practice of educators working in museum environments (Tran & King, 2007), it is acknowledged that such settings are still a world apart from the workplace and the home-school boundary.

From a focus on the nature of support, questions relating to the efficacy of such support, and how best to capture the quantity and quality of the subsequent learning inevitably follow. In more formal learning settings, assessment of learning generally involves measuring gain against a set of pre-established parameters. Such an approach arguably has relevance in systems wherein the inputs - the teaching, the curriculum, the physical space, and the population – are tightly regulated. Such factors are much harder to regulate and thus compare in non-formal contexts, in instances when contexts are bridged or when framed by new technologies.

In sum, whilst the nature of learning beyond formal schooling and across contexts is gaining greater recognition conceptually (Edwards, Gallagher, & Whittaker, 2004; Banks *et al.*, 2007), there are still many important questions relating to its management, support, and acknowledgement to be addressed. Some of these questions are developed further in the final section of this volume.

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