

# Continuity and learning



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# Contents

Introduction	4
Learning Outcomes	5
1 Workplace learning	6
2 Biographical learning	7
2.1 Learning lives and biographies	7
3 Learning lives	8
3.1 Practical activity	9
Conclusion	10
Keep on learning	10
References	11
Acknowledgements	11

## Introduction

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This free course, *Continuity and learning*, will be of interest to a wide range of people who support children's learning in primary schools: teaching assistants, classroom helpers, parent volunteers, cover and lunchtime supervisors, and playground monitors. It focuses on workplace learning generally. In the readings and activities, you will consider how you currently learn, and how you have learned in the past, in your workplace.

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# Learning Outcomes

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After studying this course, you should be able to:

- identify specific dimensions of workplace learning
- understand the concept of biographical learning
- plan and carry out an informal interview about lifelong learning.

# 1 Workplace learning

Theories of workplace learning draw on socio-cultural theory and are broadly Vygotskian.



Figure 1: Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934)

Vygotsky highlighted the role of social interaction within a ‘culture’ – this could be a country’s culture, the culture of a family, or a workplace culture – and created the term ‘socio-constructionism’. He believed that an individual’s learning and development depend on interaction with others, and that a culture provides individuals with ‘tools of the mind’ – ways of thinking – to help them form a view of the world. The research of Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) focuses on workers as individual learners, and how the individual is influenced by the wider culture of the workplace. Drawing on socio-constructionism, they suggest that there are four interactive dimensions of workplace learning:

- a worker applies prior knowledge, understanding and skills
- the workplace culture influences the ways in which a worker co-constructs and establishes opportunities for learning
- a worker’s dispositions (habits of mind, or attitudes) contribute to the culture and ethos of the workplace
- a worker’s identity is shaped by belonging to the workplace community.

### Activity 1 Dimensions of workplace learning

Make notes on each of the four dimensions listed above and how you think they are relevant to you and to your work role. Use the following questions to aid your thinking:

What prior skills, knowledge and understanding do you bring to your current role?

How does your work context influence the ways you create or access opportunities for your own learning and development?

How does your thinking and behaviour influence the life of your workplace?

How does the community of the workplace (people, practices, relationships) influence how you see yourself?

*Provide your answer...*

### Discussion

As you reflected on these four questions, you may have identified learning that was informal and 'accidental', and learning that was formal and intentional. Intentional learning in the workplace is usually triggered by the identification of a gap in knowledge or skills. But workplaces sometimes also provide opportunities for unplanned learning that may or may not be immediately applied. As you reflected on the four questions, you probably also identified workplace learning that was imposed on you by others, and workplace learning that you felt motivated to do for yourself.

## 2 Biographical learning

In the following reading, you will explore the concept of biographical learning and how adults can create narratives to gain a deeper understanding of their learning lives.

The Learning Lives project was a large-scale study by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and ran from 2004 until 2008. Its aim was to increase understanding of formal and informal learning. The project involved in-depth interviews with 117 adults aged between 25 and 85 years. The project took a biographical approach by asking adults to narrate their lifetime learning and work experiences.

One of the findings is that constructing 'life stories' and 'life narratives' enables us to learn from what has happened to us in our personal lives and in our work. The researchers suggest that life narratives and stories have 'plots' that the authors (ourselves) use to select, organise and present life events in a particular order, which might be sequential or thematic (TLRP, 2008, p. 3). In short, constructing a plot enables us to make sense of our lives in a coherent way and to identify patterns of learning in our experiences.

### 2.1 Learning lives and biographies

Now read the following chapter: 'Adult learning lives and biographies' by Michael Tedder and Gert Biesta (chapter 4 in Safford et al., 2011)

As you read the case study about Anne Wakelin, note the way in which her experiences are framed by the concepts of 'plot' and 'learning potential'.



Two things in particular strike us with regard to this reading. First, that the teller of a life story has some choice about how their story is constructed. This is not to suggest that the person telling the story is lying about what happened in their life – although that is possible, of course. But it seems that the act of telling about oneself requires a creative putting together of remembered information, possibly for the first time. Some of these memories will be recalled easily, whereas some may be only partially recalled, and some may be very cloudy indeed. Second, the act of putting together ‘a longitudinal version of the self’ (Bruner, 1990, p. 120, cited in Tedder and Biesta) offers us a chance to learn about ourselves in relation to the life we have led and the work we have done.

## 3 Learning lives

In the video that you will now watch, the following six people talk about how they came to be in their roles working in primary schools and how they continue to learn ‘on the job’:

- Vicky Grant, a teaching assistant who is also training to be an occupational therapist
- Tina Blundell, who began working as a teaching assistant after her own children had started school and is now a higher level teaching assistant
- Jean Ionta, a pupil support assistant who also began work in a school after being a full-time mum for many years
- Hugh Kelly, a grandparent and retired police janitor, who helps younger children in the school who sometimes require a bit more support
- Lucy Allen, a teaching assistant who used to work in a temporary supply capacity, often having to learn on the spot
- Pam Crawford, a parent volunteer studying for a teaching assistant certificate and who has an interest in special educational needs.

### Activity 2 Examples of learning lives

As you listen to these adults talk about their roles, jobs and backgrounds, or afterwards, think about the following questions:

What kinds of formal learning can you identify in their comments?

What kinds of informal learning can you identify?

What knowledge, skills and understandings have they developed through formal and informal learning?

How do they apply their learning to their current jobs?

How are they continuing to learn in their workplaces? What knowledge, skills and understanding are they developing in their current roles?

Can you identify dimensions of Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004), or Vygotskian concepts about learning through interaction with others, in their commentaries?

Linking this video to the Tedder and Biesta reading you did earlier, how far do their commentaries reflect a sense of ‘biographical learning’?

Video content is not available in this format.

[Working in primary schools and learning ‘on the job’](#)



*Provide your answer...*

## 3.1 Practical activity

In the following practical activity, you will gain experience of carrying out an informal interview and reflecting on your own learning life. There are two parts to this activity. First you will interview a colleague or friend for about 30 minutes, and second they will interview you.

### Activity 3 Learning lives interviews

You will need to choose an adult you know and who can talk easily about themselves. It could be someone you work with, or a friend, but not someone in your close family. Agree a time when you can spend about an hour together. As good practice, prepare your colleague or friend by showing them the following prompts and questions you will be using:

Tell me what you remember most about being a child at primary school.

Tell me about your experience of secondary school.

Tell me about what you've done since leaving school.

What is the most enjoyable job you have done so far and what did you feel you learned from doing it?

Looking back on your life so far, what do you think are the main things you have learned about yourself?

Is there anything else you would like to say about yourself?

Interview your colleague or friend for about 30 minutes, and then ask them to interview you in the same way. You should not electronically record this interview. Try to make notes as you talk together. If this feels difficult, you should write notes as soon as possible afterwards. As you carry out this interview, there will probably be times when you will need to prompt your interviewee – for instance, 'Can you tell me any more about this?' or 'Yes, please go on' or 'Can you remember anything else?'

After you have done the interviews, write in draft or note form (approximately a page, or 500 words) an account of your own 'learning life', drawing on your memory of the interview and any notes you took at the time. Try to become aware, as you begin to construct this biography, of how you are telling your life story and the learning that this narrative describes for you. You could use a first-person voice to narrate this biography (using 'I', 'me' and 'my') and you could use the questions above as headings to help you structure your draft.

What would you say are the key points in your learning life biography? What connections are there, in your biography, between your learning experiences and your work experiences?

*Provide your answer...*

Following this activity, take a moment to consider the process of informal interviewing and writing up notes of the main points. Was any of this more challenging or easier than you thought it might be? You may wish to write further thoughts about your experience.

## Conclusion

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In this free course, *Continuity and learning*, you have explored dimensions of workplace learning. You have considered the interactivity of learning in the workplace: how people and cultures create formal, informal, planned and unplanned learning opportunities. You have explored concepts of biographical learning and how adults can create narratives to better understand their learning lives. You have applied all these concepts to reflect on your own learning and work role. You have also planned and carried out an informal interview on the theme of learning lives, and written a draft of the key points of your own learning life.

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## References

Bruner, J.S. (1990) *Acts of Meaning*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.

Hodkinson, H. and Hodkinson, P. (2004) 'Rethinking the concept of community of practice in relation to schoolteachers' workplace learning', *International Journal of Training and Development*, vol. 8, no.1, pp. 21–31.

Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TRLP) (2008) 'Learning Lives Research Briefing Number 51' [online], [www.learninglives.org.uk](http://www.learninglives.org.uk) (no longer available).

## Acknowledgements

This free course was written by Kimberly Safford.

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### Text

Reading entitled 'Learning lives and biographies': Tedder, M. and Biesta, G. (2011) 'Adult learning lives and biographies' in Safford, K., Stacey, M. and Hancock, R. (eds) *Small-scale Research in Primary Schools: A Reader for Learning and Professional Development*, London, Routledge in association with The Open University; adapted from the original paper, 'Learning without teaching? Opportunities and limitations in biographical learning for adults', written for the European Conference 'Educational Research from Teaching to Learning?' in Gothenberg, Sweden, 10–12 September 2008.

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