

Continuity and learning

12 hours study

Level 1: Introduction

E101_1 Learning through enquiry in primary schools

Continuity and learning

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Introduction

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.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of level 1 study in [Education](#).

Learning outcomes

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)

[View description - 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...

[View discussion - Activity 1 Dimensions of workplace learning](#)

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'

[View transcript - 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

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.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of level 1 study in [Education](#).

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 (no longer available).

About this free course

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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.

Images

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This free course is adapted from a former Open University course called *Learning through enquiry in primary schools* (E101).

Activity 1 Dimensions of workplace learning

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.

[Back to Session 1 Activity 1](#)

Figure 1: Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934)

Description

This is a picture of Vygotsky as a young man, with short hair and a striped shirt, looking thoughtfully at the camera.

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Working in primary schools and learning 'on the job'

Transcript

Vicki Grand (teaching assistant)

So laying down, flat on your backs with your arms outstretched, on the mats.

Some of them have coordination difficulties, some of them have communication difficulties. But basically the group is formed with mobile children as well so that the children can learn from each other, and it's to develop their gross motor skills, which hopefully will have an impact on their learning.

Excellent. And roll the other way. All across the mats.

We use the Play to Learn programme, and I take it a little bit further than that, using my occupational therapy skills. At the moment I'm studying part time to become an occupational therapist.

As high as you can, stretch your legs out, Ryan.

Whoops! Where are you going? Excellent. That is fantastic.

I left school at 16 and went and did A levels, sort of sixth-form education. And then went to university for a few months, to study Law and Spanish. Found that wasn't for me, didn't enjoy it at all.

So that I went into NatWest Bank and worked my way up there, became sort of in-house financial advisor, and lasted about four years there until I really don't want to do this anymore. So I went to work for a specialist learning disabilities company that helped remediate learning difficulty through exercise. Unfortunately I was made redundant there, so I came to Herbert Thompson as behaviour support, and then have decided to stay.

Stop and freeze.

I've decided to study occupational therapy, so I do that part time.

- Child** Going to do this again, are we?
- Vicki Grant** This is what I did. I went off the balls onto the mat.
- Wow, did you? You had a soft landing. That's it, so, leaning backwards. Excellent.
- I haven't really done a teaching assistant course. But I think because I have worked with children through work experience at school, and college, and through my last job as well, I was taught a lot of safety techniques within my last role, which I've transferred here. And also school policies, being involved in PE lessons, things like that, you can also model what the teacher does which will help you then to develop your own style of dealing with the children.
- You like this? Try turning around and facing forwards. Are they? That's OK. We won't be long.
- Teacher** We're going to have some silent thinking time. While we're on the carpet, if you want to close your eyes...
- Tina Blundell (higher level teaching assistant)** Well, I've been working with children for the last 20 years, starting off with preschool children, and then decided I wanted to sort of broaden my horizon and work within a school environment. So once my own children started school, I approached other schools. I sent a CV all around to schools in Windsor, expressing my wanting to work in schools.
- What else can you do with a ball, Harrison?
- Harrison** Glide.
- Tina Blundell** Glide. Well done, good boy. So you're going to write that down?
- I started off as a general TA in mornings. And then after various courses, I've done the TA introduction course, I've done the NVQ Level Two, NVQ Level Three, the maths literacy courses and then on to HLTA. Also, just recently to finish my course on PSHE and got a certificate from the university for that, and I enjoy my job very much.
- We're sharing ideas.

I think the more courses you go on and the more qualifications you get on, I think it helps you to enhance and to help children with their learning abilities as well as with my own learning abilities.

Child

It's quite hard.

Jean Ionta (pupil support assistant)

Quite hard to earn things, because you're not getting them for just doing good work. You're getting them for being kind.

Child

Or being honest.

Jean Ionta

Being honest, honest is very good.

I came into it, I had been off work for several years to have my family. I've got two daughters. So I was a full-time mum, very lucky to be able to stay at home, be a full-time mum until they were of age, secondary school. I felt I could go back to work in a part-time role.

Before I had the children I worked in clerical, in an office. So I applied to work in the office in St. Patrick's, and I was very lucky to get the job. After a while I decided I love working with the children, and I soon realised I had a bond with the children, I kind of got where I had a good relationship with the children. And a post come up for a pupil support assistant in the school, and I went to the head teacher and asked her, would it be possible for me to still keep my role as clerical and do the pupil support assistant? And she thought, yeah, wouldn't see that as a problem.

I had to go in training and do the additional support for learning part and learn all about what these children, you know, are about, and what my role is going to be. And I worked in particular with one wee boy who had huge emotional and behavioural problems in class, and I really was with him the whole time. And then time moved on and this position come up to be full time, and I had to make a decision. And I decided I definitely wanted to be doing the role as a pupil support assistant.

Stop, stop, stop. I hear a lot of bickering in here.
That's not what we do. What do we do, Vinny?

Vinny

Me and Ethan are taking out the turns.

Jean Ionta

Take turns. But don't argue.

Hugh Kelly (grandparent volunteer)

What insects should we do to start with?

I was a police janitor for 12 years. I retired for ill health. I was asked if I would like to volunteer to help with the children in St. Patrick's primary. My PNC check, through working with the police still covered me, which meant I was allowed to come and work with the children.

After a check, Miss Campbell requested if I would like to come and help with the primary ones, with Miss Kelly, which I was more than happy to do.

Child

[inaudible].

Hugh Kelly

Could you show me? Why don't you show me, let me see. We've got to write...

Before we started the lesson I was requested to work with one of the children on a one to one to bring them on a bit.

And good, OK. All right. All right, Naomi.

That's a bike, That's correct. So fill it in the one for bike. The bike one. That's it, good boy.

I'm helping a couple of the children who need, who require extra help through no fault of their self. The youngsters in a class that have just turned five, they joined when they were four. We have ones that have come in that were five, actually, when they come into Primary One, they are more advanced. Miss Kelly works with them.

The ones that are younger, I tend to work with those to help her. And I'm bringing them on through my group.

Hugh Kelly (offscreen)

He's coming on. He's getting there. He's made blunders. But most children do.

You're not watching my hand. Where's your alphabet? See? The feedback I get off the children is great.

I enjoy interacting with young children which, you get great back from them. You can see them coming on and see them when they come to you, that they're learning off you by listening to you.

Child

A boy [inaudible].

Lucy Allen (teaching assistant)

I've been a teaching assistant now for about four years, and I started working in the nursery. I secured a job by doing supply work, actually, which was really brilliant.

Child

It was girls yesterday, and it's boys today.

Lucy Allen

Oh, I see.

I signed up with New Directions, and they just would phone you up at sort of 7:00 in the morning and say, can you get halfway across Cardiff or into the valleys? And I'd have to say, yes, I can make it or no, I can't, and then you get to the school and you're really thrown in the deep end, actually, doing supply. It's a real steep learning curve, you know. M for Mason. And then...

Child

Bella.

Lucy Allen

You don't know what to expect. They don't give you any information on the phone, what class you're going to be in, what the situation is. There was a couple of times where I would go to a school and I'd be working one on one with a child with quite a severe disability, and I don't have experience working with disabled children, and I'd just have to learn on the spot. And I would be asked to do things like change a nappy of sort of a 10-year-old child. And I've got no experience with that. But you actually just had to get on with it. Ask all the questions that you needed to. Get support from the staff.

I think that's one thing I learned quite quickly was to ask, when I wasn't sure, just to ask for support, or ask for someone to come and show me what I needed to do.

Pam Crawford (parent volunteer)

In the space, the next word...

I am a volunteer. I came straight into the classroom and I've been learning bits and pieces. It was mainly, to start with, to help support my son who's got a special needs statement, and along the way I decided, this is really what I want to do now.

It made sense, spare time, to come in here and also get a background to his learning and how I may be able to help. So that's how I started out, decided I liked it and thought, this is the path for me, and decided to start the college course to support that. While I'm here, I'll get a qualification and enjoy myself along the way.

OK, try to look at the steps.

The course I'm studying is a certificate in teaching assistance. It's a Level Two. And it's a new-found qualification, what they call a QCF, is a Qualification Certificate Framework. I've learned how the curriculum has changed over the years, and having left school 30 years ago, it's all sort of coming back to me slowly, and also, I'm learning along the way, with the children. Maybe things I've forgotten, maybe new things, but I'm learning all the way.

At the moment I've just got my sights on the Level Two and the Level Three teaching assistant. But I'm going to see how it goes, and see where it takes me, and see what paths there are that I can take. And maybe do some special needs courses alongside that.

Teacher

Mrs. Crawford, can you give us two numbers?

Pam Crawford

I think we should start at 19 down to 9.

Children

Ooh. That's easy. 19, 18, 17.

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