

This article is downloaded from



**CHARLES STURT**  
UNIVERSITY



CSU Research Output  
*Showcasing CSU Research*

<http://researchoutput.csu.edu.au>

**It is the paper published as:**

**Author:** C. M. Down

**Title:** Understanding the role of context in lifelong learning

**Editor:** G. D. R. E. B. H. Debbie Orr

**Conference Name:** Lifelong Learning: Reflecting on the successes and framing futures. 5th International Lifelong Learning Conference

**Conference Location:** Rockhampton

**Publisher:** Central Queensland University

**Year:** 2008

**Pages:** 147-152

**Date:** 16-19 June 2008

**Abstract:** This paper challenges the way we conceptualise learning, arguing that learning involves deliberate interaction with our social, emotional, intellectual and physical contexts in order to better understand and work within them. This necessitates a reconsideration of the metaphors associated with learning such as transfer, generalisation and the contextual nature of learning.

**Author Address:** [cadown@csu.edu.au](mailto:cadown@csu.edu.au)

**URL:**

<http://acquire.cqu.edu.au:8080/vital/access/manager/Repository/cqu:2928?exact=creator%3a%22Down%2c+Catherine+M.%22>

<http://www.obs-pascal.com/node/777>

[http://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object\\_id=9272&local\\_base=GEN01-CSU01](http://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=9272&local_base=GEN01-CSU01)

[http://books.google.com/books?id=nws\\_QwAACAAJ&dq=1921047569&hl=en&ei=8UohTKjWDdS9cYGx7VI&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CCUQ6AEwAA](http://books.google.com/books?id=nws_QwAACAAJ&dq=1921047569&hl=en&ei=8UohTKjWDdS9cYGx7VI&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CCUQ6AEwAA)

**CRO identification number:** 9272

---

## UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF CONTEXT IN LIFELONG LEARNING

Catherine M. Down  
Charles Sturt University

### ABSTRACT

This paper challenges the way we conceptualise learning, arguing that learning involves deliberate interaction with our social, emotional, intellectual and physical contexts in order to better understand and work within them. This necessitates reconsideration of the metaphors associated with learning such as transfer, generalisation and the contextual nature of learning.

---

### KEYWORDS

Experiential learning; contextual learning; generalisation; transfer of learning.

### INTRODUCTION

All learning occurs in a context. This context may be physical, social, psychological or, as Illeris (2002) argues, the tension caused by the juxtaposition of these three spheres of human experience. Yet, there is little written in educational literature about how the context shapes the learning and, by extension, how we can increase the potential of individuals to learn in a variety of contexts.

Conceptualising learning as an active and deliberate interaction with our social, emotional, intellectual and physical contexts in order to better understand and work within them, means that we need to explore new ways of describing some of the key concepts associated with learning. This paper looks at three problematic issues relating to the theory of experiential learning, especially learning through and from work. If we are to integrate formal and experiential learning, to match the rhetoric of a learning, or knowledge, society, then we need to find new ways of understanding the role of context in learning, the nature of transfer of competence across different work contexts and to redefine generalisation.

The paper commences with a brief outline of the author's completed PhD research on which this conceptual paper is based, before discussing of what is needed to prepare and support experiential workplace learning in contexts characterised by change and uncertainty. It is this form of lifelong learning that is addressed in this paper

### Outline of the research

The research thesis, on which this paper is based, focused on the question: "How do practitioners understand the transfer of competence (that is, what they know and can do) across different

workplace contexts and how does it influence their practice?"

The research investigated the experiences and perceptions of 108 vocational education and training practitioners, who had changed jobs or whose jobs had changed, focussing on how they were able to adapt what they knew and could do at that time. The research is phenomenological, using a methodology designed to collect and analyse data from the participants without decontextualising it. The collection of data occurred over a period of five years and was undertaken in two stages, with the second stage validating and building on the first stage. Minimally structured interviews and a questionnaire were the main data collection tools used. Some descriptive statistics were used but the research was qualitative in intent. The questionnaire used in the second stage of the research was grounded in practice as participants used "stories" of their own experience as the basis of their responses.

### RESEARCH OUTCOMES

Over the past two decades, the rhetoric of teaching and learning practice has reflected a move from a teacher-centric approach to learning to one which is more learner-centred. The findings of my PhD research suggest that this move needs to go even further. Teaching and learning needs to be context- rather than content-centred, with learning understood as the knowledge and skill developed by interacting with contexts in thoughtful, reflective processes.

108 experienced educational practitioners contributed to these findings. It is their individual and collective voices which underpin these research outcomes. It is imperative that the practical wisdom these voices represent is heeded if our work and learning is to continue to keep pace with societal and global change. Such a change involves a reconsideration of learning, context and generalisation.

## Rethinking learning

The research findings were consistent with a view of learning as an interaction with its context in order to better understand and work within it. Although the research participants were reflecting on their own, and their students', learning experiences, the design of the research meant that such reflection was grounded in an experienced scenario, which they had reconstructed. Thus, the reflection was focused on how they had experienced, changed and been changed by the context of the scenario they had chosen to analyse.

This might be termed situated reflection insofar as it is consistent with descriptions and explanations of situated learning. Situated reflection takes on:

*The proportions of a general theoretical perspective [and provides] the basis of claims about the relational character of knowledge and learning, about the negotiated character of meaning, and about the concerned (engaged dilemma-directed) nature of learning activity for the people involved. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 33)*

This is whole person reflection in which 'agent, activity, and the world mutually constitute each other' (p. 33). This concept has been the subject of a number of research studies (such as those of Billet, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2005; Boud, 1999, 2006; and Stevenson, 2003, 2005). Such reflection may occur on an individual or collective basis; it may be internal or collaborative. My research outcomes included the development of a metaphoric framework to guide such situated reflection. This framework builds on Schön's metaphor of a swamp (1987, p. 3) to describe the lowland of everyday professional practice and uses virtual spaces, each with its own set of physical, social, and psychological contexts, in which the reflection might occur to ensure that the resultant learning and application is both iterative, developing and ongoing.

## Rethinking the transfer of learning

Transfer, as a construct of educational psychology 'refers to the appearance of a person carrying the product of learning from one task, problem, situation, or institution to another' (Beach, 1999, p. 101). The issue of transferability is, obviously, an important one with respect to workplace performance. Most of our formal education systems are basically vocational in intent, and based on the assumption that competence is transferable across differing work and education contexts.

If competence is considered to be a relationship between capacity and performance in a particular context, then the transfer of such competence to new or different contexts would appear to be problematic. If, however, the relationship is seen to be three dimensional with the ability to understand, take into account and work within a particular context being given equal importance as personal ability and task completion, then the resultant competence should be both adaptable and capable of transfer to new and different situations.

The research participants reflected, as might have been predicted, a range of understandings about the transfer of competence. However, contrary to expectations, the majority appeared to recognise the interactive nature of transfer and the context and the role of transfer in learning.

## Transfer as consequential transitions

My understanding of transfer has been greatly influenced and transformed by the work of Beach (1999, 2003) in redefining transfer as a series of transitions the consequences of which are learning resulting in changes of practice. His work has resolved the basic contradictions in the earlier work of cognitive researchers who described transfer as if it is the learning and not the learner who is crossing across different contexts. It is, therefore, largely the understandings which come from a study of the work of consequential transitions and of polycontextual boundary crossing which provide a theoretical basis in terms of how transfer is understood by the participants.

By moving away from the metaphor of transfer to the metaphor of consequential transitions (1999, pp. 110-111), Beach also disposes of two unnecessary distinctions which are associated with the transfer metaphor: that is, distinguishing transfer at the task level from transfer at the level of larger forms of social organisation; and separating intentional from unintentional transfer (p. 110). He did this by first redefining the process of generalisation, which he defined as 'the continuity and transformation of knowledge, skill and identity across various forms of social organization' (p. 112). His definition recognises that 'learners and social organisations exist in a recursive and mutually constitutional relation to one another across time' (p. 111).

This definition postulates that the generalisation process is not an abstraction, as it is obtained without decontextualisation (Van Oers, 1998, p. 136). Such generalisation requires systems of artefacts to:

*weave together changing individuals and social organizations. ... [this] can involve transformation, the construction of new knowledge, identities, ways of knowing, and new positionings of oneself in the world. They are consequential for the individual and are developmental in nature, located in the changing relations between individuals and social activities.(Beach, 1999, p. 113)*

### **The evidence: participant stories**

The responses made by the research participants gave strong support to the concept of significant transitions and on generalisation through embedding contexts. They provided a basis for the argument that the metaphor of transfer needs to be replaced by that of significant transitions (Beach, 1999, p. 12). That is, when individuals cross contextual boundaries, there are significant experiences which need to be reflected upon, in both an anticipatory and a retrospective sense, in order to understand, and ascribe meaning to, the new situation. This process of meaning-making constructs our identities, both as a learner and a worker. It is a two-way process – when an individual moves in to a new context, both the individual and the context will significantly change. Individuals need to recognise and be proactive with their agency in this process, in order to empower themselves as active members of their new community of practice. Their learning, as a response of the change process their boundary-crossing has initiated, moves from being peripheral to integral as they seek and gain membership of the workplace community.

Four types of consequential transition are identified by Beach, that is:

*... lateral, collateral, encompassing and mediational. Lateral and collateral transitions involve persons moving between pre-existing social activities. Encompassing and mediational transitions have people moving within the boundaries of a single activity or into the creation of a new activity.(Beach, 1999, p. 114)*

The stage 2 participants provided, through their “stories”, examples of the four types of consequential transitions identified by Beach: lateral, collateral, encompassing and mediational. ‘Lateral transitions occur when an individual moves between two historically related activities in a single direction’ (1999, pp., p. 114). This type of unidirectional movement was the most common type of transition described by the participants. For example, one participant described his experience in mentoring a younger friend over a period of twenty-one years when he wrote:

*Marc started teaching in 1974 and spent the next 21 years as a classroom teacher of maths and chemistry. His teaching career as a subject co-ordinator, level co-ordinator, curriculum co-ordinator, house master and designer of school timetables mirrored mine to a large extent. He was a brilliant teacher and tutor but not formally promoted in the Government system. With a Ph.D in Chemistry and Honours in Mathematics, he was exceptionally qualified in comparison with other teachers in government secondary schools.(s2p061)*

Not all consequential transitions are made willingly. In the following scenario, the transition was not initiated by the storyteller when she wrote:

*I moved ... from a production role in a national, public sector communications organisation (where the subject matter and program outcomes were directly focussed on the education sector) to freelance project work for business and government clients in the vocational and tertiary education sector.*

*Initially, the skills I had developed at the first communications organisation seemed very specific to that industry, the particular technology (radio & television) and the unique cultural role of the corporation. However, in time, I came to see that I had some important generic skills and understandings, as well as quite specific skills in project planning, sequential organisation of ideas and information, interviewing, writing and editing etc, that were highly transferable to new work contexts. As a freelance worker, each context and set of project requirements were different, so various combinations of prior skills and knowledge were applied. (s2p037)*

‘Collateral transitions involve individuals’ relatively simultaneous participation in two or more historically related activities’ (Beach, 1999, p. 115). For example, one participant traced a significant series of consequential transitions which moved from school student to self-employed architect when she wrote:

*This transfer and movement is over a long time, being 1968 – 1984, mostly as a single mother. During this time I moved from being an interior design student (art student) to working in a restaurant (waiting, cooking & finances), designing crafts for weekly magazines, church organist, engineering draftsman, architectural draftsman, building*

*supervisor, architectural student and, finally, qualified architect.*

*All of the experiences and scenarios provided greater reference points upon which to refer to the designing of spatial configurations and the understanding of the building process. The skills were theoretical, physical (= drafting), emotional and social. Architecture encompasses all of life and so no learning experience is wasted.(s2p011)*

Many of the stages outlined above were collateral transitions: being an interior design student; working in a restaurant; and designing crafts for weekly magazines all occurred concomitantly. These changes also show that collateral transitions often run counter to societal notions of development. For example, the participant repeatedly gained qualifications in one sphere, for example in building and construction and then returned to study architecture whilst working as a professional building supervisor.

Examples of collateral transitions from participants were only described by women participants, and were often concerned with enrichment and challenge, rather than being directly concerned with their working trajectories. In a second example of a collateral transition, one of the participants described her movement from working as a potter to writing TAFE curriculum when she wrote:

*I was a potter. My core business was throwing pots on the wheel, decorating them, firing them and selling them. I designed and developed my own range of pottery researching appropriate glazes and firing techniques. Additionally however I took on projects that interested me. I built a pottery studio with a friend and received a grant to assist. I wrote articles on pottery for craft magazines. I was on a project working group that established a large arts centre in Melbourne. I assisted in large events organised for that arts centre and I ran workshops for the community. I also taught pottery to Aboriginals rehabilitating from drug and alcohol abuse, unemployed people, children and a talented autistic person. I worked collaboratively with other artists. I communicated effectively with a large range of people.*

*Then one day I turned around and decided that I needed to earn a lot more money and decided to look for a well paid job. I successfully landed a temporary job writing curriculum for TAFE. I was appointed to a*

*permanent position as an accreditation officer with the State Training Authority soon after. Someone explained the idea of transferable skills to me and that is the basis on which I successfully made such a dramatic change.(s2p022)*

It is interesting that this participant gave the details of these collateral transitions only as background to the move she understood as transfer - that is, the lateral transition from working as a potter to writing TAFE curriculum. Yet this significant move was underpinned by her experience in collateral transitions and the crossing of contextual boundaries on a day-to-day basis.

Encompassing transitions were the third type of significant transition which Beach described. 'Encompassing transitions occur within the boundaries of a social activity that is itself changing. ... Like lateral transitions, encompassing transitions involve a clear notion of progress, although it is associated with the direction taken by the changing activity rather than the direction of individual moving between activities' (Beach, 1999, p. 117). One example of an encompassing transition is the following account of a change in role within the same workplace. The participant relating this wrote:

*I'm reflecting on the situation of the training administrator who joined me in the training section of the industry association. Prior to her taking on this new role she had been working in an administrative/secretarial role in another section of the industry association and moved into the training function as a completely new role. She had to learn about the training activities, provide advice and assistance to members inquiring about courses, undertake all the electronic setting up and formatting of information as well as being able to enrol participants in courses, provide confirmation of their enrolment, ensure they were appropriately invoiced, etc.*

*In this situation, the work functions are changed which means that new skills and knowledge will, in all likelihood, be needed. In addition, although the work context may superficially remain the same, it has changed insofar as the person's relationship with that context has changed and, therefore, how he or she experiences that context, has also changed.(s2p012)*

The final group of transitions identified by Beach were those of mediational transitions 'Mediational transitions occur within educational activities that project or simulate involvement in

an activity yet to be fully experienced' (Beach, 1999, p. 118). Most of the stories told about expected situations of transfer might be described as mediated transitions. For example, a new retiree wrote:

*As I have recently retired, I have proactively gone out to acquire new skills/knowledge, namely in the arts/history fields so that I might broaden my knowledge/appreciation base for the world I live in. In addition, I have recognised the need to develop skills in some areas to prepare me for a purposeful retirement e.g. learning to bowl (even though I feel that I am not quite ready).(s2p015)*

Our learning from these consequential transitions, arises from the social, cognitive and emotional tensions (Illeris, 2002, p. 18) which are a necessary consequence of our boundary crossing and subsequent activities. This learning is situated in three ways, that is, practically; in the culture of the occupation and/or the workplace; and in the social world (adapted from Evans & Rainbird, 2002, pp. 17-18).

The stage 1 participants identified these three aspects of transfer within their responses. As one of them said:

*There's the work we do, the people we work with and the culture of the place – how we do, and feel about, things around here. They are all involved – it's not that one is more important than the others.(s1p13)*

Similarly, the stage 2 participants recognised the 'three integrated dimensions of the learning process' (Illeris, 2002, p. 20) which was generated by intercontextual boundary crossing. Van Oers' process of continuous progressive recontextualising (1998, p. 141) was recognised by a number of respondents in terms of the exploration of and comparison of contexts to find the degree of "fit". This enables the embedding of the old context in the new and is not, in Van Oers' view, an infrequent activity which only occurs when crossing contextual boundaries but one which is occurring on a continuous basis as we interact with our environment and our learning is mediated by the artefacts we use to manage social change.

The third issue which the research participants recognised was the contextual boundary crossing which is part of our everyday activities. Supporting the transfer process, or the consequential transitions across work contexts, requires more than simply making sure that the boundary crossers have the necessary technical skill to do their assigned jobs. It requires support in identifying variations and commonalities in

the activities involved and the context in which such activities are situated. In addition, it requires proactively enabling workplace learners to assume new roles and responsibilities as they learn through interaction with the workplace context.

Just over half of the participants believed that patterning (copying the behaviour of others) would result in only superficial learning, unless it was accompanied by a conscious search for difference. Thus as one participant wrote:

*I think that patterned behaviour is important, but mainly insofar as it throws into sharp relief the differences between the new and the old situations and, as you suggest above, provides a base to be seen to be doing the right thing while you are trying to find out what it should be, e.g. the strategy of checking out what experts in the field do.(s2p018)*

Thus enactment becomes the process of trial and error, based on one's initial assessment of variations and commonalities, until it is possible to embed the activities and the contexts within each other. As a result of this process, it is the differences which are significant. Thus boundary crossers need to recognise that patterns 'are dynamic and they, [the learners], have the power to change them' (s2p041).

On the other hand, unless learners 'use reflection to significantly unpack the way that they pattern the response ... they are not able to interact with changing environments rapidly' (sp2041). The recognition of a superficial pattern 'can lead to complacency and the failure to appreciate the newness of a situation' (s2p071). Other negative aspects on a reliance on patterning included 'being influenced by the behaviour of the workplace group and thus failing to learn deeply and thus be able to adapt and innovate' (s2p038); and substituting patterning for learning and, thus, failing to come to terms with difference, diversity, ambiguity and uncertainty. This means that they are 'not able to deal with contingency; an everyday occurrence in the workplace' (s2p052).

## CONCLUSION

Rethinking transfer is just the beginning of a change in the way we view learning as thoughtful interaction. The research showed that the perceptions of practitioners, based on their practice and experience, have already begun to embrace these ideas in response to the changing social worlds they inhabit.

This paper has only just touched the surface of the concepts which are commensurate with a

change in thinking about transfer and its implications for teaching and learning practice. Rethinking the concept of generalisation is also important, as is the understanding of the demands and processes of polycontextuality. It is imperative that such ideas are researched, disseminated and adopted into everyday educational practice if we are to meet the challenges of learning and working within a knowledge society in which lifelong learning is a necessary part of our identity as individuals.

## REFERENCES

- Beach, K. (1999). Consequential transitions: A sociocultural expedition beyond transfer in education. In A. Iran-Nejad & P. D. Pearson (Eds.), *Review of Research in Education* (Vol. 24, pp. 101-140). Washington, D.C.: American Educational Research Association.
- Beach, K. (2003). Consequential transitions: A developmental view of knowledge propagation through social organizations. In T. Tuomi-Gröhn & Y. Engeström (Eds.), *Between School and Work: New perspectives on transfer and boundary-crossing* (pp. 39-61). Oxford, UK: Pergamon.
- Billett, S. (1996). Towards a model of workplace learning: The learning curriculum. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 18(1), 43-58.
- Billett, S. (1998). Transfer and social practice. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Vocational Education Research*, 6(1), 1-25.
- Billett, S. (1999). Guided learning at work. In D. Boud & J. Garrick (Eds.), *Understanding Learning at Work* (pp. 151-164). London & New York: Routledge.
- Billett, S. (2001). Co-participation: affordance and engagement at work. *New directions for adult and continuing education*, 92, 63 - 72.
- Billett, S., & Pavlova, M. (2005). Learning through working life: self and individuals' agentic action. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 24(3), Page 195-211.
- Boud, D., & Garrick, J. (Eds.). (1999). *Understanding Learning at Work*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Boud, D., & Solomon, N. (2006). Work-based learning, graduate attributes and lifelong learning. In P. Hager & S. Holland (Eds.), *Graduate Attributes, Learning and Employability* (pp. 207-220). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.
- Evans, K., & Rainbird, H. (2002). The significance of workplace learning for a 'learning society'. In K. Evans, P. Hodkinson & L. Unwin (Eds.), *Working to Learn: Transforming learning in the workplace* (pp. 7 - 28). London: Kogan Page Limited.
- Illeris, K. (2002). *The Three Dimensions of Learning: Contemporary learning theory in the tension field between the cognitive, the emotional and the social* (D. Reader & M. Malone, Trans.). Frederiksberg, Denmark: Roskilde University Press.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schön, D. A. (1987). *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Towards a new design for teaching and learning in the professions*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Stevenson, J. (2003). Expertise for the workplace. In J. Stevenson (Ed.), *Developing Vocational Expertise: Principles and issues in vocational education* (pp. 1 - 25). Crows Nest, Australia: Allen & Unwin.
- Stevenson, J. (2005, 24-26 June 2005). *What a difference a pedagogy makes: Researching lifelong learning and teaching*. Paper presented at the Third International Conference, Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning, University of Stirling, University of Stirling, Scotland.
- Van Oers, B. (1998). The fallacy of decontextualization. *Mind, Culture and Activity*, 5, pp. 135-142.

