Introduction

This chapter discusses how an individual’s identity has an effect on their learning and \textit{vice versa}. In particular it focuses on what it means to have an identity as someone who sees oneself, and is seen by significant others, as a competent learner. When thinking about identity it is usual to focus on the characteristics of an individual that are maintained over time and that distinguish one person from another. However, identity is socially constructed in interaction with others and so it is dynamic and only relatively stable (see Schuller et al., 2004). It follows from this that identity is not fixed, but is created and re-created in interactions between the individual and the social world that they inhabit (Bauman, 1996; Sfârd and Prusak, 2005; Wenger, 1998). This does not mean, however, that identity is completely fluid, since individuals seek to make sense of their experiences by constructing patterns of consistency and coherence regarding the nature of their identity in their relationships with others.

Learning has a strong relationship to identity because, through the institutions of the family, education and work, the individual’s outlook and self-image are socially shaped so that ‘fundamental to our understanding of learning … is our understanding of the whole person in a social situation’ (Jarvis, 2009: 31). Viewing learning and identity as developing through social relationships and within particular contexts or ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger, 1998) is also helpful in dealing with issues of power and responsibilities because it addresses:

\begin{quote}
how collective discourses shape personal worlds and how individual voices combine into the voice of a community … [as well as] the mechanisms through which the collective and the common enter individual activities … through learning.
\end{quote}

\textit{(Sfârd and Prusak, 2005: 15)}

In modern times constant change results in the pervasive fluidity of social memberships and of identities themselves in ways that often lead to fear and insecurity (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). Therefore the role of learning in shaping identities may be greater now than in the past, since learning can be the primary means of creating a new self because what is potentially possible is only limited by our imaginations. So, engaging in learning can be the means of making a reality of our desire to be, for example, a great chef and thus can close the critical gap between our actual and designated identities (Sfârd and Prusak, 2005: 19).
Learning is therefore not only about acquiring new skills and practices but also about changes in people’s identity. However, learning identities tend to act as self-fulfilling prophecies and so play a critical role in determining whether the process of learning will end with what counts as success or with what is regarded as failure. This is because identity as a competent learner is shaped by the complex interaction of a number of factors that include past learning experiences and the mediating effect of family influences upon them (Rees et al., 2000), as well as the norms and values of the social networks to which individuals belong (Gallacher et al., 2002; McGivney, 2001). So identities feed into, and are fed by, learning experiences.

Researchers (see Crossan et al., 2003; Tett and Maclachlan, 2007; Wojciki, 2007) have suggested that engaging in learning in adulthood can have a significant role in the formation and re-formation of the identities of participants and consequently of their ability to reach their learning goals. This is because, as Schuller and colleagues argue (2004: 13), ‘learning [is] a process whereby people build up – consciously or not – their assets’ particularly in the form of greater self-confidence. However, a person’s activities and choices are both constrained and enabled by their horizons for action and this has a major impact on the decision to engage in learning. As Hodkinson (2004: 7) argues, learning is ‘influenced both by the opportunities a person has access to, and also by a person’s perception of self, of what they want to be, and of what seems possible’. Thus people bring a particular life history, which influences how they engage with learning through the ways it shapes their expectations, hopes, and aspirations. Barton and colleagues (2007: 18), for example, have emphasised the importance of individual histories; how people have their own ‘ways of being’, the cluster of social, psychological and affective characteristics that make up their identities; the significance of the circumstances in which they are situated, over which they will have some control; and the importance of people’s plans and how they see their future possibilities. In particular, poor experiences of learning at school can have a strong negative effect on a decision to participate in education as an adult. The task of overcoming this negativity should not be underestimated, for as Jonker (2005: 123) argues:

at the individual level, schooling can offer the confidence of becoming an educated, knowledgeable person. It can also saddle one for life with the feeling that one is doomed to fail. Schooling, in other words, is part of the complex process of shaping and reshaping the self.

This negative identity is particularly common in people who have difficulties with literacy, because people tend to internalise a deficit discourse and assume that earlier experiences of ‘failure’ to learn are solely their responsibility. Since individuals play an active role in constructing meaning from the discourses that they encounter, this suggests that learning designed to bring about change should focus both on the individual’s sense of self and identity and also on how these are shaped by, and shape, their agency. In order to explore this further the chapter now turns to an examination of the role of learning identity in adult literacy education.

Adult literacy students

This section draws on two studies of participants in literacy programmes (Maclachlan et al., 2008; Tett et al., 2006) where many of the students described negative experiences of initial education that had caused them to be reluctant to engage in structured, or ‘learning-conscious’ learning (Rogers, 2003: 27). Rogers distinguishes the everyday learning that we engage in through living and acting in the world around us from acquisitional or ‘task-conscious’ learning (p. 16). He maintains, however, that many adults with negative experiences of compulsory education struggle to marry their construction of themselves as capable ‘task-conscious’ learners with their sense of self as learners in structured educational contexts. Although adults may recognise their competence in relation to the acquisitional learning that they regularly encounter, such as
caring for children or elders, their perceptions and experience of education inhibit the transfer of this positive self-construct in formalised learning contexts. They can therefore revert to constructing themselves as not competent, because they equate learning primarily with formal education. This means that they have negative or, at best, fragile identities as learners.

Many of the students who participated in these studies pointed out, when reflecting back on how they felt at the start of their courses, that they had been reluctant to engage in any kind of learning. For example, one participant said ‘school days are bad memories, and it puts you off learning because it makes you feel such a failure, and you don’t want that again’ (Maclachlan et al., 2008: 33). Another spoke about the teachers being:

more interested in the bright ones, the ones that could get on …. They sort of just left me to one side … I tried to do my best, but I just felt that because I wasn’t bright and I wasn’t brainy that people just didn’t want to know.

(Maclachlan et al., 2008: 32)

The discourse that people internalised was that they were ‘thick’, ‘stupid’ and ‘not very bright’ human beings, and this led them to hide their literacy difficulties. For example, another student said ‘I used to feel like I was a nobody at work because I just kept thinking about all the things I couldn’t do and having to hide them from my workmates’ (Tett et al., 2006: 50).

Many recalled memories of bullying and harassment that affected their ability to learn because they felt unsafe. For example, a student’s memories of his learning at school were shaped by his experiences of bullying from his teachers. He said, ‘In English and Math classes if you got picked on by the teacher … and when you got it wrong – you got hit. So there was fear – no one would put up their hand unless you were 100% sure, and that marks you’ (Maclachlan et al., 2008: 33).

However, this research showed that participating in programmes where students’ abilities and achievements were recognised by both their peers and tutors was crucial in changing these negative views of their competence as learners. As one student suggested:

Coming here helps me keep on going. I don’t think I’m a failure any more. …. It’s making me feel good doing something I wanted to do for myself. … It’s boosting my self-esteem, giving me more confidence and helping me know I can get a job.

(Maclachlan et al., 2008: 56)

Tutors also offered the students trust and respect by responding positively to their ideas about what they wanted to learn. For example, ‘the tutors here offer me lots of choice and help me to move on to the next thing when I’m ready’ (Maclachlan et al., 2008: 50). Peer support also built a positive learner identity especially when: ‘the whole group gets on well together and it gives me support to try things that I find difficult such as writing on the flip-chart’ (Maclachlan et al., 2008: 51). A final aspect of the way in which participating in these programmes contributed to a new sense of being a person that was capable of learning was positive tutor–student relationships. For example:

It motivates me that the tutors are working so hard to help me. I’ve already been able to write a letter and had a good result from it. I feel it’s the first time anyone’s reacted to anything I’ve said.

(Maclachlan et al., 2008: 58)

This quote illustrates that, although the individual student can affect his/her own confidence in learning, tutors and peers can help increase this by providing support, encouragement and constructive feedback, especially when the learning results in positive change. A final feature of the programmes that impacted on
learner identity was being placed at the centre of social networks that regard learning as valuable and productive. This led to changes in participants’ sense of their potential, ability and achievements and a growing realisation that they were not as ‘thick’ as they had seen themselves, and been seen, in the past.

As Beth Crossan and her colleagues have argued, seeing oneself as a competent learner is the product of the complex interplay between the ‘social and economic structures that shape people’s lives, the educational institutions which determine the processes of engagement with learning, and the learners themselves’ (2003: 58). All education represents the practical articulation of a particular set of values, be they implicit or explicit. The data from these research projects show that, where students are assisted in actively and critically making informed choices about their lives and their learning, then changes in learning identity can follow.

This section has focused on planned learning in educational programmes, but much learning occurs more informally through engagement with the social world, particularly at work. Work is a context in which we are aware of being part of a community that learns how to engage in particular practices, but these are often in a tacit, rather than a conscious, way. The next section therefore investigates learning at work and in particular how an individual’s learning identity is mediated by the organisational culture of the workplace.

Learning in the workplace

There is a growing body of research that focuses on learning both as a component and as an outcome of individuals’ engagement in work (e.g. Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Billett, 2006; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). This research recognises that identity is experienced through the competences manifested in sharing a common enterprise, values, assumptions, purpose and communication through work, which means that ‘we know who we are by what is familiar, understandable, usable, negotiable; we know who we are not by what is foreign, opaque, unwieldy, unproductive’ (Wenger, 1998: 153). Identity in this sense is not fixed, because people are also defined in terms of their non-participation in practices as well as in the movement between or within them. People also bring a set of conceptions, procedures, beliefs and dispositions to their working lives, so learning is shaped by the diverse ways in which individuals elect to engage in workplace activities and these in turn are ‘mediated by individuals’ subjectivities’ (Billett, 2006: 2). At the same time workplaces themselves offer different learning environments that can range from the ‘restrictive’ to the ‘expansive’ (see Fuller and Unwin, 2004). In an expansive environment, learning for the whole workforce is developed, employees are seen as an asset to the company and there is a belief that everybody can learn. These different environments interact with individuals’ orientations to learning, because people also identify with the social expectations of their ‘community of practice’ (Wenger, 1998) in terms of both what they do and how they go about it.

To illustrate these interactions this section draws on a research project that investigated workplace learning in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Scotland through a study of 14 companies from different employment sectors (Ahlgren et al., 2007; Ahlgren and Tett, 2010). The research investigated both employers’ and employees’ attitudes to, and experiences of, learning.

Managers in companies with an ‘expansive’ orientation to learning emphasised the opportunities that employees had to develop their careers and also demonstrated their sensitivity to the needs of their employees. For example, one manager of a care home for older people said:

Some employees are older and hadn’t been to school for years and the thought of going through a qualification just terrified them. A couple of staff left but I managed to convince the rest of them that support would be [available] here … . We didn’t want them to go to a college because it would be
too scary for them so we thought if they are all together and they are doing their training then there’s going to be a support mechanism here as well.

(Ahlgren and Tett, 2010: 21)

On the other hand, managers with a ‘restrictive’ attitude to learning were more negative about opportunities and imposed limits on learning. For example, one manager from a manufacturing company argued:

As we change products there are some people who don’t have the ability to learn the new products … [especially] people who have been with the company a long time. They could build the products we used to make ten years or more ago … but they don’t have the ability … to make the more modern [products]. That’s always a difficulty.

(Ahlgren and Tett, 2010: 21)

From the employees’ perspective, those working in expansive environments valued the informal opportunities to learn from colleagues and for colleagues to learn from them. This mutual learning led to an increase in confidence as their own knowledge and experience were valued and appreciated by their colleagues and employers. For example one person (a care assistant) reported:

You get to see things. You can tell if someone is under the weather and you understand what is wrong … . We work closely with nurses … [and] in here the staff nurses will ask us because we are the ones working closely with the residents.

(Ahlgren and Tett, 2010: 23)

From the restrictive end of the continuum, in a company that undertook stone cleaning, the administrator who was very keen to learn said:

They repeatedly promised me computer training but there was just no time for me. We tried several times to slot in but … I could never get to any training. So the training was supposed to be available to all the staff but unfortunately my workload has to come first.

(Ahlgren and Tett, 2010: 23)

Her manager, whilst acknowledging her lack of opportunities, argued that training was expensive:

The administrator has had the least training and part of that was because she didn’t have anyone helping her in the office. So you need to make the time and bear the costs … it is not just their wages, it is the fact they are not earning.

(Ahlgren and Tett, 2010: 22)

This example illustrates the unequal distribution of learning affordances within the company (Billett, 2001), so that, even if individuals were keen to learn, they were denied opportunities.

On the other hand, some employees, who had not seen themselves as competent learners, had been encouraged to participate in training by the expansive learning environment in their workplace. For example, one person (a support worker) said:

I have not got a lot of confidence in myself. … I am not brainy, I was never in trouble or anything like that, but I wasn’t much interested in school. … [Here] if you go into the office and ask they will help you, they will never see you struggle, … and if they think there is some training that would be good for you … they are very encouraging.

(Ahlgren and Tett, 2010: 24)
Some individuals really welcomed the opportunities to engage in training courses, particularly those that led to qualifications. For example, one person (a child care worker) felt that her formal qualifications, gained through her workplace, had given her the confidence to communicate effectively with parents. She explained: ‘I know exactly what I’m talking about and I can explain it to them. I know what I’m doing and I know how to plan activities for the kids. I now have a better knowledge’ (Ahlgren and Tett, 2010: 23). In her case, her confidence in learning was met by the affordances offered by the workplace.

Eraut (2004) in his study of a range of workplaces found that much learning at work occurs through doing things and being proactive in seeking learning opportunities, but he emphasised that this required confidence. He argued that confidence came from successfully meeting challenges in one’s work, while the confidence to take on such challenges depended on the extent to which workers felt supported in that endeavour. Thus, he suggested that there was a triangular relationship between challenge, support and confidence. The evidence from his research showed that both confidence in one’s ability to do the work and commitment to the importance of that work were factors that affect individual learning. If there is neither challenge nor sufficient support to encourage staff to seek out, or respond to, a challenge then confidence declines and with it the motivation to learn.

Workplaces can boost employees’ confidence and function as ‘safe’ environments that encourage people back into learning. For example, one person (a care worker) found that the communication course offered through her workplace gave her a sense of security in the knowledge that people around her were unlikely to find out about her literacy needs:

I don’t know if I would have pursued it myself had it not been offered through work. You wouldn’t want them talking about you, whereas in your work nobody knows.

(Ahlgren et al., 2007: 29)

Finally, one employee (a cleaner) who successfully completed an introductory computer course with several of her colleagues said:

I wouldn’t go on a course myself … when a few were going together from work, then that was different, you feel OK, and if you can’t do it, you can always ask the others … and if I don’t know, then I’m not stupid on my own. We can have a giggle about being thick together.

(Ahlgren et al., 2007: 30)

This quote also demonstrates the value of being part of a social group that is engaging in the learning of new practices.

These differing examples show how learner identity and workplace culture interact to facilitate or close down opportunities for learning and development (see Berg and Chyung, 2008). In addition, whilst everyday life in work is characterised by collective and habitual routines, these routines are always guided by the social and relational emotions attached to them and so change can be challenging. So, for one of these employees (a care worker) the opportunity to engage in learning in a formal setting was seen as intimidating due to her previous negative experience of schooling and the emotions that this generated. She described her experience of a personal development course held at a Further Education College.

Ten minutes into the course I went to introduce myself, well without a word of a lie I was actually feeling sick, I hate things like that. I was so embarrassed that I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me. You had to say what your ambition was … I couldn’t say anything. I hate talking in front of people. I really find it intimidating.

(Ahlgren and Tett, 2010: 24)
This again demonstrates the value of learning in the familiar environment of work, rather than somewhere formal and removed from the everyday.

Clearly the relationships between work, subjectivity and learning are crucial to understanding the complexities of identity, learning opportunities and organisational culture. As Scheeres and Solomon (2006) have pointed out, the changing demands on workers in the 21st century have meant that workers are required to engage in on-going change and learning and ‘much of the learning involves workers becoming subject to, and subjects of, various organisational practices’ (p. 88). However, workers are able to make choices that, whilst they are exercised within and through the social practices of the workplace, are not necessarily constrained by them.

The culture of the workplace interacts both with individual employees’ identities as learners and also with the ways in which learning and training are delivered. Those people who have had earlier negative experiences need to have a supportive experience of learning that challenges their assumptions that they can’t learn. One key way in which this can be done is by building on the tacit knowledge that people have of their workplace practices that has been gained through simply doing the job. Learning through participating in the cultural practices of the workplace means that it is ‘an integral part of the generative social practice of the lived in world’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 5). Clearly, an approach that builds on employees’ existing knowledge and understanding is highly influenced by the workplace culture and, if there is an expansive approach to employees that goes beyond skills and reaches towards a holistic approach to learning and development, then it will enable positive learning to be undertaken. Such an approach also enables people to see their future possibilities in a different way, as their employers value the knowledge and experience that they bring and this promotes their own confidence in learning.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated that coming to see oneself, and being seen by others, as a person who has an identity as a competent learner is the product of the interaction of the individual’s own personal history and the social context in which the learning takes place. Focusing on the different contexts of adult literacy students engaged in educational programmes and learning in workplaces has provided an opportunity to explore different influences on learner identity. In the first context, the emphasis has been on the impact of earlier experiences of formal education and, in the second, the learning affordances (Billett, 2001) that workplaces offer. In both cases it has been shown that, although identities are assigned by powerful others, we can also create our own sense of self despite these constructions. Individuals are able to assert their agency through the adoption and adaptation of different forms of participation and identity construction within different communities. These communities also exist in the structurally defined hierarchies of everyday life ‘so people are also marked by their location within these larger systems of power and privilege that have shaped their experience’ (Cervero and Wilson, 2001: 11). People are not passive receptacles or carriers of discourses, but rather are actively and critically interpreting and enacting them. However, their ability to assert their agency is constrained by the socio-cultural structures within which they act. This means that engaging in meaningful learning activities that are developed through shared social relationships will be limited both by the individual’s internalised conceptions of their identity as a learner and by the learning affordances offered in their educational, working and social lives.

One value of engaging in new practices and experiencing new perspectives through learning lies in the awareness that it brings of both how we see ourselves and how others see us, which opens up the possibility of positive change. An aspect of this is the gaining of reciprocal and mutual recognition of each other’s skills, knowledge and understanding, leading to a stronger identity as a competent learner. In the literacy programmes this involved providing an environment in which students could thrive through a pedagogical approach that placed participants’ own goals at the centre of the learning activities and created a supportive atmosphere where they were treated with respect within relationships of trust. In the
workplace this involved learning that built on employees’ tacit and experiential knowledge and was shared vertically and horizontally across the workplace. In both contexts these approaches were more likely to lead to increasing competence and confidence in learning because people were regarded as knowledge–rich and thus able to contribute, rather than being seen as suffering from a skills deficit. The evidence presented here from these differing contexts shows that receiving respect and recognition from significant others about who we are and what we can do makes a contribution to our ability to see ourselves as competent learners, and so our learning identity can change.

References

Learning and identity


