

Chapter 2

Becoming As an Appropriate Metaphor for Understanding Professional Learning

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1 Introduction

Accepting that human understanding of learning inevitably employs metaphor, this chapter argues that the idea of professional learning is most fruitfully illuminated by employing the metaphor of ‘becoming’. The argument has two strands. Firstly, we show that ‘becoming’ enjoys significant advantages over common alternative metaphors, such as acquisition and transfer, participation and construction, which are still favoured by various policy makers and industry bodies. Secondly, we outline and discuss several examples of professional learning, derived from various research projects, to illustrate the value of the ‘becoming’ metaphor for analysing and enhancing professional learning. The ‘becoming’ metaphor also serves to make it clear that professional learning is a part of lifelong learning.

2 Learning and Metaphors

It is a somewhat surprising and little-noticed fact about learning that humans are unable to think about it without resorting to metaphors. Perhaps because learning, or the lack of it, is such a ubiquitous feature of human experience, and the language widely used to describe it seems eminently in line with common sense intuitions. Hence, it is mostly taken for granted that everyday thought and talk about learning, featuring concepts such as ‘acquiring learning’ or ‘transferring learning’, are closely descriptive of concrete reality. This seeming tangibility of these common

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learning metaphors is reinforced, perhaps, by their wide deployment within peoples' experience of compulsory schooling. It is precisely because common sense is typically unexamined, that it comes as a surprise to many to realise that 'acquisition' and 'transfer', when employed in relation to learning, are metaphors. Their being metaphors means that it is, at most, in some respects only that learning is analogous to things being acquired and transferred. However, as Scheffler long ago warned educators, every metaphor has limitations, 'points at which the analogies it indicates break down' (1960, p. 48). He argued for the need to explore the limitations of dominant metaphors, thereby 'opening up fresh possibilities of thought and action' (Scheffler 1960, p. 49). In recent decades, theories of learning have illustrated Scheffler's point by proposing and investigating the worth of a series of alternative metaphors for conceptualising learning, including participation, construction and becoming. This chapter will discuss each of these metaphors, including a detailed consideration of the 'becoming' metaphor.

Exactly why the use of metaphors is inescapable in thought and talk about learning is itself a complex matter, one that is well beyond the scope of the present chapter. (For some suggestive ideas on this matter, see Murdoch 1997; Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999; Hager 2004). However, the limitations that attach to metaphors, especially the respects in which the two things being compared are not alike, is an important theme in what follows.

3 Critique of Existing Professional Development Theorising and Its Metaphors

At first sight, 'professional development' is a sound term for expressing the concept of the ongoing education of professionals through the various stages of their careers. According to dictionary definitions, the term 'development' primarily has biological connotations: growth, evolution, gradual unfolding and fuller working out, for example. Thus, the development metaphor, as employed in 'professional development', actually implies that professionals are in a process of 'becoming'. In keeping with its biological connotations, the development metaphor suggests that development arises both from within and from without. That is, professionals continuously develop their own capacities, but always in response in part to goings on in their own particular environment. When professional development is understood in this biological sense, the connections between professional development and the concept of lifelong learning become readily apparent.

However, we think that as it has gained widespread currency, the term 'professional development' has largely lost these biological connotations. This is so because professional development has become increasingly associated with the linked 'acquisition' and 'transfer' metaphors that constitute the common sense understanding of learning. The main effects of linking the 'acquisition' and 'transfer' metaphors with professional development, thereby erasing the original biological connotations, can be summarised as follows:

1. Acquisition and transfer suggest pre-specification and standardisation. Professional development becomes delivery of content decided by outside 'experts'. Rather than connoting an organic unfolding process, development comes to stand for professionals being stocked with pre-packaged material supplied by outside developers. This does not sit well with notions of professional autonomy and agency.
2. The nature of professional practice is greatly over-simplified. Practice is thought of as application (transfer) of (acquired) theory. This leads to a valuing of theories and understandings that were gained from formal professional preparation courses, and a devaluing of theories and understandings derived informally from experiences as a professional practitioner. As this problematic formal/informal dichotomy takes hold, the more tacit and less readily articulated aspects of professional practice become overlooked. Whilst this might sit well with current performativity agendas, it means that only some kinds of knowledge and ways of knowing and learning are recognised.
3. Professional development is focused exclusively on individuals and individual learning. As will be shown later, both individual learning and social learning are key components when learning is viewed as 'becoming'.
4. Professional development routinely is divorced from actual practice. The commonest model is to deliver it in formal settings away from the professional workplace. The new learning once transmitted and acquired is supposed to be taken back to the workplace and applied (transferred). In this way, professional development is supposed to change and update practice. On this model, learning is no longer an interaction of learner (professional) and professional work environment as the biological roots of 'development' imply.

In summary, the once helpful development metaphor has been twisted out of all connections with its original biological connotations. Taken together, the above four trends set up an unhelpful, but inevitable, gap between the rhetoric of professional development, continuing professional education, and the enriching experience of learning from practice over time, usually with others. This gap encourages the perception amongst some, seemingly capable, professionals that continuing professional education and the like is an unnecessary chore that gets in the way of 'real' professional learning. Clearly, this is an unhealthy educational situation for any profession to be in. Yet despite their widespread deployment and unreflective acceptance, the 'acquisition' and 'transfer' metaphors, being metaphors, have distinct limitations as Scheffler reminded us earlier.

4 Limitations of the 'Acquisition' and 'Transfer' Metaphors

In unreflective thought and talk about learning, it is assumed that the term 'acquisition' is used in its normal everyday sense. Closer inspection shows this to be not so. The common-sense view, mirrored in many theoretical views of learning that

adopt the acquisition metaphor, is that when someone acquires (possesses) learning, both that acquisition process and what they have learnt are inside of them (in their mind/brain for propositional learning; in their body for skill learning). But this is not normally the case for instances of acquisition and possession. People acquire and possess items such as cars, blocks of land or works of art. But none of these possessions is thereby located inside of their owners. Why should the matter be any different for acquisition and possession of knowledge or skills? Recent work in neuroscience (see Bennett and Hacker 2003) challenges the ‘common sense’ understanding of learning as a ‘thing’ located in the head, as it is suggested by the acquisition, possession and transfer metaphors.

There are also problems with the transfer metaphor itself. Closer inspection turns up puzzling oddities. In normal usage, to transfer something or someone is to convey, remove or hand them over to a new place or position. To be transferred is literally to leave place or position A and go to place or position B. So, say, property is transferred (conveyed) from a previous owner to a new owner. A footballer is transferred from one football club to another. But this is definitely not the sense in which we ‘transfer’ knowledge and skills when we teach them. Professional developers do not literally transfer their knowledge and skills to professionals. Rather, if the professional development session is successful, a new instance of the knowledge or skill is created, seemingly in the professional’s head or body. But the professional developer still retains the skill that has been supposedly ‘transferred’ to the professionals. This is definitely not transfer in the usual sense. The metaphor misleads us.

An apparently simpler case is that of a professional transferring knowledge and skills from place to place. The professional learns, say, ‘x’ in location ‘y’. Then, they move to location ‘z’ and use it (transfer it). But, once again, this is an odd usage of ‘transfer’. Surely when professionals use the learnt skill, it is more accurate to say that they applied it to the new situation. If they literally transferred it, they would leave it behind when they left the new situation. It is more accurate to say that professionals having skills transfer from place to place, rather than the skills themselves transferring. Once again, the metaphor can easily mislead us.

5 Other Influential Metaphors

In the last several decades, diverse writers about learning have sought to take account of its social and situated character. This theorising has specifically aimed to also encompass learning that occurs outside of formal education settings. The diversity of both this theorising and the cases of learning that it encompasses suggest that seeking a single general account of learning may be unrealistic. That is, there may be many inherently different types of learning. This work has led some to view learning as a conceptual and linguistic construction, one that is widely used in many societies and cultures, but with very different meanings, which are at least partly contradictory and contested. On this view, there is no external, reified entity that is

'learning'. Rather, people construct and label certain processes/activities/products as 'learning' (Saljo 2003). In these theories, the ideas that 'learning is a reified thing' and 'individuals are the main or only locations of learning' are both rejected. These newer learning theories include situated learning, socio-cultural activity theory, cognitive apprenticeship and more. Here, we will not attempt a separate account of each category of theory, as that is a lengthy and complex task (see Hager and Hodkinson 2009). Also, see Hager (2011) for a critical overview of these theories as they relate to understanding learning at work). Instead, we will consider the various alternative metaphors that are employed by these newer theories and how our understanding of professional learning is creatively changed by these alternative metaphors. The metaphors that are invoked by these newer learning theories tend to be employed across theories rather than one particular metaphor being distinctly associated with just one theory. The main metaphors, which will be discussed here are: *participation*, *construction* and *becoming*. In each case, these alternative metaphors for understanding learning fit more congenially with the lifelong learning concept than did the *acquisition* and *transfer* metaphors.

5.1 Learning As Participation Metaphor

The metaphor of learning through *participation* in human practices gained wide attention through the seminal work of Lave and Wenger (1991). Their key idea that learning arises from learners participating in communities of practice is also referred to as *situated* learning. For them, viewing learning as situated within a community of participation means that it is highly contextual. They thereby reject the 'common sense' view that learning is a thing that can be acquired and transferred independently of its surroundings. Situatedness and participation also draw attention to the process aspects of learning. In this approach, learning becomes a process that is inseparable from the socio-cultural setting in which it occurs. This contrasts sharply with the common-sense idea that learning is a product to be acquired and transferred. In later works, the participation metaphor has been widely employed even by thinkers whose work otherwise has little in common with that of Lave and Wenger. Thus, *participation* has become an important metaphor in diverse writings about learning.

The participation metaphor and its related ideas suggest a very different understanding of learning from that captured via the metaphors of the 'common sense' account. The 'what' of learning becomes a complex social construction, one that subsumes the individual learner. Rather than learning being a thing or substance (the 'common sense' view), here it is a complex entity that extends well beyond the individual learner. It is a set of more or less complex practices, a social construction undergoing continuous change. On this account, learning results from active participation in social practices. The learner can be thought of as gradually being subsumed into an evolving set of practices that comprise a complex social construction. Thus, learning is located in social situations, not in the

individual learner. Furthermore, in contrast to the ‘common sense’ view, learning is no longer viewed as independent of and simply contained within the learner and the surrounding context. In the long run, the evolving set of practices will itself have a history, one that is independent of the participation of any given learner. As well as not locating learning within individual practitioners, participation theories also raise the possibility, indeed the likelihood, of communal learning, that is, learning by teams and organisations that is not simply reducible to individual learning (see, e.g. Hager 2011).

As already discussed, the common-sense understanding of learning includes notions of movement that underpin the transfer metaphor. Participation theories also invoke movement. The difference is that whereas the ‘common sense’ view posited movement of the ‘thing’ that was learnt, the participation metaphor replaces this with movement by the learner. Learning for newcomers to a profession is thought of as movement of the novice professional from insignificance to greater prominence within the practice of the profession as they increasingly engage in it. The practice is viewed as a ‘thing’ that is ‘there’ well before novices begin to engage in it. New practitioners move within the practice from being novices to, mostly, proficient performers; from legitimate peripheral participation to full participation. Whilst early participation theories focused on the learning of newcomers, later work, for example, Wenger (1998), came to view legitimate peripheral participation as a special case. This shift of focus came about as it was realised that all professionals, even very experienced ones, need to continue to learn from their ongoing participation in evolving practices.

This focus on the need for continuous learning is reinforced by the central emphasis of participation theorists on learning being inherently contextual. If what is learnt includes significant contextual features, then it follows that the professionals as learners are highly likely to learn something of value from each novel case or situation that they encounter. Of course, they will also draw on previous learning, but given that there are some novel features in the present situation, there will likely be a need to modify and adapt earlier learning to deal effectively with the new context. If professional learning does indeed proceed in this way, then the acquisition and transfer metaphors are seen to be too simplistic. According to the participation metaphor, professional learning (and the professional) continues to change as contexts change (Hager and Hodkinson 2009, pp. 9–11). This is why the participation metaphor brings to the fore the ongoing learning of experienced practitioners rather than just concentrating on the initiation of novices into professional practice, as in the early work of Lave and Wenger. Overall, if this continuous learning account is applicable to all kinds of human practices, it means that learning is a much more complex phenomenon than the common-sense ‘acquire it and transfer it’ model would have us believe.

This notion of professional learning being an integral component of ongoing successful participation in the practice of the profession has the potential for refurbishing current ideas of professional development and for continuing professional education. It also sits well with the concept of lifelong learning. The notion that professional learning is inherently contextual contrasts sharply with the ‘common

sense' view that learning transcends context. However, such is the sway of the ubiquitous acquisition and transfer metaphors that continuing professional education is too often viewed as acquisition of pre-specified products in locations remote from actual professional settings, followed later by transfer when professionals return to their worksites. Theories that view learning in terms of participation practices would suggest that continuing professional education needs to focus closely on the learning opportunities arising in actual professional practice. Current continuing professional education arrangements also show the abiding influence of the 'common sense' view of learning in that the focus is almost exclusively on learning by individual practitioners. However, learning theories centred on the participation metaphor suggest that both learning by individuals and learning by teams or groups are important. In many professional occupations, there is a growing stress on working in teams, often of a multidisciplinary kind. So learning theories featuring the participation metaphor imply that continuing professional education needs to be centred more on professional learning as a complex, ongoing process that springs from real community of practice problems.

By emphasising the role of contextuality, the participation metaphor challenges any tendency to assume that there is uniformity in the continuing professional education needs of members of a profession. The implication is that the learning needed for the practice of a designated profession should not be conceived of as a standard list of items to be acquired by all would-be practitioners. Rather, professional practice is better thought of as participation in a continually evolving social process, one featuring constant appearance of novel situations, new kinds of equipment, local traditions or preferences. This suggests that the learning needed for successful practice is continuous and is not fully specifiable in advance. A practitioner being proficient in a given area of practice does not necessarily translate into proficiency in neighbouring areas of practice. In circumstances where professional learning (participation) is a continually evolving process, transfer and acquisition quickly lose any appeal as general explanatory concepts. However, the participation metaphor does not seem to have made much impact so far on continuing professional education arrangements. Whilst it is common parlance for professionals to refer to 'participation' in continuing professional education activities, this too often means mere attendance at lectures, workshops, conferences and the like that attract specific continuing professional education points towards the mandated total. This is participation in a system unconsciously founded on crude notions of acquisition and transfer. Whatever its limitations are, the participation metaphor at least suggests something richer than this.

5.2 Limitations of the Participation Metaphor

However, whilst the participation metaphor does offer fruitful ideas for enriching continuing professional education, it does not in itself provide satisfactory answers to all questions about learning. Various limitations have been noted. One is that it

embeds learning so completely within the particular social context that it is silent on exactly how individual professionals are reshaped (another metaphor) by their learning. It is a feature of participation theories that they say nothing about the professionals' individual learning as their personal identities change from that of novices to full participants in the practice of the profession (see, e.g. Guile and Young 1999; Elkjaer 2003). According to participation theories, the individual professional is simply integrated into a social participatory process. What is missing is any sense of the individual life history, dispositions and agency of the learner. An account of learning that fails to address these is surely incomplete (Billett 2001; Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2004b).

A further deficiency is that most of the theorising and research studies that use the participation metaphor centre upon a single learning context such as a particular workplace. As the focus has shifted more onto the learning of experienced practitioners, this has meant that there is a tendency to ignore what had happened in previous work locations or what might happen in future ones. It is a feature of theories centred on the participation metaphor that they say very little concerning the effects of previous learning on present learning or of past and/or present learning on future learning.

We conclude that all human learning entails participation in a social context even if that context is a desert island or preparing for a quiz show. However, we do not think that the participation metaphor alone can adequately explain all learning, particularly when we note that there are many different kinds of learning for many different purposes. (Somewhat controversially, Sfard (1998) does think that, taken together, the acquisition and participation metaphors can provide a full explanation of learning).

5.3 Learning As Construction Metaphor

This construction metaphor (and associated metaphors such as *reconstruction* and *transformation*) views learning as the remaking of either professionals or of professionals together with their environment. Thus, issues of identity and identity change are important for this approach (see, e.g. Hager and Hodkinson 2009). There are at least two main kinds of theories associated with the construction metaphor. The first is the group of theories that are often called simply *constructivism*. This group of theories is focussed on transformation or construction going on *within* the individual learner. It has been very influential within fields closely associated with propositional knowledge, particularly mathematics and science education. The key idea is that learning involves the transformation and reconstruction of what is already known by the learner. An important subsidiary metaphor is 'scaffolding' – the suggestion is that new learning is built onto existing understanding along the lines of bricks being added to an existing wall. Learners are transformed into professionals, in much the same way that a wall is transformed into a building. The metaphor presents learning as continually changing as the learners construct/reconstruct their

own evolving understanding of it. Here, it may look to be similar to the learning through participation metaphor. But the vital difference is that constructivism sees the context of learning as an external container, of marginal significance, whereas the context is active and is of central importance for participation theories. For constructivism, the individual changes while the context remains the same. However, there are more or less radical versions of constructivism. Extreme radical versions view the ‘what’ of learning as differing across individuals, because each learner constructs his/her own unique understanding. Less radical versions accept that much important knowledge, such as the content of science, remains relatively unchanged (Phillips 1995). These less radical versions of constructivism are preoccupied with how individual students can be assisted to construct the same, that is, the correct, understanding.

Widely influential in the preparation of professionals has been Schön’s work (1983, 1987) on the ‘reflective practitioner’. Although Schön’s work is not usually labelled as ‘constructivist’, this is a convenient place to consider it briefly since Schön’s reflective practitioners do, in effect, continually construct and reconstruct themselves. Schön’s starting point was a rejection of technical rationality (i.e. the view that professional practice consists essentially of practitioners using standard disciplinary knowledge to analyse and solve the problems that arise in their work). Since technical rationality clearly assumes ‘acquisition’ and ‘transfer’, Schön could be seen also to be rejecting these metaphors. Schön (1983) advanced an alternative epistemology of professional practice, centred on the notion of ‘reflective practice’. A ‘reflective practitioner’ exhibits ‘knowing-in-action’ and ‘reflecting-in-action’. For Schön, knowing-in-action is underpinned by ‘reflecting-in-action’ or ‘reflecting-in-practice’. These are accompanied by spontaneous episodes of practitioners ‘noticing’, ‘seeing or ‘feeling’ features of their actions and consciously or unconsciously changing their practice for the better. So for Schön, reflective practitioners continually construct and reconstruct themselves in the course of practice. Despite its wide influence, the limitations of Schön’s work have become apparent in the light of later developments (see Hager 2011). These include:

1. It focuses sharply on individual practitioners.
2. It focuses almost exclusively on the rational, cognitive aspects of practice.
3. It tends to present practice as thinking or reflection followed by application of the thinking or reflection. In this respect, it retains vestiges of this ‘acquisition’ and ‘transfer’ metaphors.
4. Points 1–3 taken together mean that learning from, and during, practice is assumed to be akin to formal learning, thereby favouring the acquisition metaphor.
5. It fails to acknowledge sufficiently the crucial roles that social, organisational and cultural factors play in learning from, and during, practice.

A second main group of theories that employ the learning as construction/reconstruction (or transformation) metaphors are more holistic. They take as their unit of analysis the learner(s) together with their environment. Thus, they view learning as a complex relational web that transcends the individual learner. Moreover, this complex relational web is an evolving process. This process includes, of course,

the learner evolving. As well, learning, as this complex, evolving, relational web, can involve emergence of novelty as new understandings and/or new contexts are formed. An example of such theories is Engeström's (2001) version of socio-cultural activity theory. The focus here is on the activity system as a whole – learning is located in the system and it is the system that changes, usually as a result of either internal or external contradictions or pressures. The context in which individual learners work and learn is regarded as changing, and they, in turn, change with it. However, the emphasis is mainly on the impact that a changing context has on individual learners, rather than the other way around.

A key idea for this second main group of theories that employ the learning as construction metaphor is the notion of collective learning. Because they pay attention to holistic learning systems, the possibility inevitably arises that 'collective entities can learn' (Salomon and Perkins 1998, p. 10). Salomon and Perkins view this sort of learning as being overlooked in the past because it is not prominent in formal education settings. Their own position is that not only does 'a great deal of individual learning and education' occur outside of formal education arrangements, but that a lot of it is group learning. Like the participation metaphor, the construction metaphor, especially in its more holistic forms, has obvious links with the lifelong learning concept.

As with the other metaphors already discussed, construction and associated metaphors also have limitations. A major one is that not much of the literature advocating this approach to understanding learning addresses both individual change and the changing context. However, rather than discussing the construction metaphor and its possible limitations further, in the following section, we pursue two lines of investigation, which are linked. Firstly, we show how it is possible to integrate some features relating to the participation metaphor with aspects of both versions of the construction metaphor. In achieving this, we argue that the problem of splitting the individual professional from the surrounding context is overcome. Secondly, we suggest that 'becoming' as a metaphor provides a very productive way of viewing this integration of aspects of the earlier metaphors. As well, we argue that the 'becoming' metaphor is especially suited to theorising professional development.

6 Learning As 'Becoming' Metaphor

As the main metaphors of professional learning are inadequate, it is necessary to find an alternative that moves beyond them. That metaphor must retain and blend the following understandings about professional learning:

1. Learning, including professional learning, entails participation in something, whether that something be a classroom, a workplace, a leisure activity or family life. Hodkinson et al. (2008) argue that this 'something' can be understood as the cultural practices that influence learning. They term these practices the 'learning

culture' of any situation. They argue that learning cultures can be found in all situations. Thus, when someone learns in a workplace, they do so by participating in the learning culture of that workplace. Learning cultures are not like boxes, which contain learning. Rather, they operate like a field of forces, many of which originate outside the specific physical context in which a person learns.

2. Similarly, engaging in learning entails personal development. People progressively construct and reconstruct their understanding, knowledge, skills and practices. This can entail shifts in deep-seated dispositions (what Bourdieu terms 'habitus') and/or in identity. It can also entail consolidation of existing dispositions, identity and practices. This means that for any learner, the content of learning may change through that process. That is, learning is about the construction and reconstruction of content as well as of learners. Moving from one location to another then becomes part of what might be thought of as a learning journey.
3. The learning cultures of the contexts in which learning takes place change and are constructed and reconstructed through the practices and interrelationships between participants as part of the wider field of force. However, it is rarely possible to separate out simple causal relationships. Rather, as Lave and Wenger (1991) argue, learning is relational, in the sense that many complex factors, influences and processes are inter-related. If one is changed, others may also alter. Specifically, individual workers/learners influence the learning cultures they participate in, and vice versa.

When these three principles are combined, a new take on learning emerges. This has various features associated with the theories employing construction metaphors, but also has aspects of the learning through participation metaphor. The metaphor of learning as 'becoming' seems to capture the main outlines of this combined perspective. At the level of the individual learner, 'becoming' combines construction with a sense of belonging – participating as the social membership of a group or setting (Lave and Wenger 1991). 'Becoming' is a socially embodied process (Hodkinson 2004). That is, it is the whole social person who becomes. It makes little sense to write or talk of 'becoming' involving mind only.

Learning cultures also become something different over time. As with individuals, this process of becoming may be imperceptible and slow, or dramatic and rapid. As with individuals, change may happen alongside consolidation of existing practices. From both the individual and learning culture perspectives, learning is as likely to be a reaction to change, as the cause of it.

The nature of any learning culture, just like the nature of any individual learner's habitus, will enable some learning, whilst constraining or preventing other learning. Put differently, the interactions between the individual and a learning culture will determine horizons for learning (Hodkinson et al. 2008). Because it is the interaction between the individual and the learning culture that matters, two professionals in almost identical situations may have quite different horizons for learning. Similarly, if the same professional moves between situations with different learning cultures, the horizons for learning will change. Finally, both the individual and learning

culture may also change and changes in one will influence the other so that horizons for learning are often in a state of flux. However, there will also be significant aspects of both the individual and the learning culture that are stable and resistant to change.

At the centre of the metaphor of learning as ‘becoming’, as we understand it, lie three central insights about professional learning:

1. Professional learning takes place in the interactions between the individual and the learning cultures found in the situations where they live and learn.
2. Professional learning entails combinations of change and consolidation. These combinations vary over time, from place to place, and from person to person.
3. Because learning is relational and is influenced by so many interacting forces and factors, the specifics of particular situations and individuals are fundamentally important in determining that learning.

7 The Benefits of Using ‘Becoming’ As a Metaphor for Professional Learning

We have advanced the argument that professional learning can be usefully understood as ‘becoming’ for three related reasons. Firstly, as we have already shown, there are serious weaknesses with other commonly used metaphors for learning. Secondly, the use of the becoming metaphor can help us deal with some problematic dichotomies in current ways of thinking about professional learning. Thirdly, we think that the becoming metaphor provides useful insights that can help guide the provision of and support for professional learning in practice. We deal briefly with the practical uses of the metaphor at the end of this chapter. Before that, we next show how the learning as ‘becoming’ metaphor helps overcome problematic dichotomies through reference to concrete examples of professional learning, drawn predominantly from our own empirical research.

Hodkinson et al. (2008) have already argued that the metaphor of learning as becoming can overcome unhelpful dichotomies of mind and body, individual and social, and between structure and agency. Here, we are more directly concerned with three more:

1. The need to understand professional learning from both the perspective of the learning situation and that of the individual professional learner.
2. The need to understand both the ongoing, routinised learning of established professionals and the learning associated with professional transitions as and when a newcomer enters the profession.
3. The need to blend both formal and informal learning in our understanding of professional learning.¹

¹Whilst the business of defining formal and informal learning is a complex one (see Hager and Halliday 2006, pp. 27–40), for present purposes the following will suffice. ‘Formal learning

We start by considering learning as an ongoing part of everyday practice, for established professionals.

8 Routinised Professional Learning

Many professional organisations, professional employers and governments are concerned about the need for professionals, such as doctors or lawyers, to continue learning. Professional practices will change considerably during the career of a professional. Consequently, the argument goes, they need to keep up to date, in order to do the job. There is increasing pressure for proof of such continuing learning to legitimate membership of many professional bodies so that such learning becomes a requirement of a continuing licence to practice. A central problem is that this work to recognise and sometimes enhance ongoing professional learning is often implicitly based upon the acquisition metaphor, whereby practitioners provide proof of having attended mainly formal learning events. The assumption is that such certified attendance will have led to further knowledge being acquired.

This acquisition view of professional learning flies in the face of considerable research evidence showing that learning at work is mainly informal and is ever present. So how can the metaphor of learning as ‘becoming’ help us better understand such routine professional learning in ways that might better inform moves to enhance and support it? To examine this issue, we draw upon a study of secondary school teachers’ learning, conducted in the UK by Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2003, 2004a, b; 2005).

This study was planned from a participatory view of learning. The fieldwork focussed on four subject departments (art, music, history and information technology) selected from two different schools. Right from the start, the researchers were concerned to take into account learning by individual teachers as well as more obviously social learning by groups of teachers. Both kinds of learning are important for a rich, situated participatory perspective. To this end, the four sample departments were all small enough for the researchers to interview and observe all the teachers in them, several times over a 2-year period. A further advantage of this sampling method was that teachers at all stages in their careers were included in the sample as were teachers of differing career status – from newcomers at the bottom of the career ladder, to heads of departments.

This research showed that for all the sample teachers, learning was an ongoing and inherent part of their practice. Occasionally, this learning was aided by the provision of formal learning events or courses, but most of it was what most people

typically applies to a situation that includes these three items: a specified curriculum, taught by a designated teacher, with the extent of the learning attained by individual learners being assessed and certified All other situations in which people learn are for us informal learning situations’. (Hager and Halliday 2006, pp. 29–30)

term informal. It happened as an ongoing part of everyday practice. Initially, most of the teachers did not even recognise most of this learning, though they progressively came to do so as the research progressed.

In the published accounts of that research, Hodkinson and Hodkinson explained their findings mainly through the learning as participation metaphor. They showed how the cultural practices in the four departments were very different so that some provided richer and more expansive learning environments than others. However, they also showed how the dispositions of individual teachers strongly influenced their own learning and practice, and the ways in which they participated influenced the practices of the departments where they worked. Whilst these explanations were fine as far as they went, they underplayed the understanding of individual teacher learning as part of an ongoing working career, and as a part of an even wider ongoing lived life. Hodkinson and Hodkinson focussed on this life-course view of learning in a later project, which we return to later in this chapter.

Seeing the learning of these schoolteachers in their departments as ‘becoming’ helps retain the valuable insights about participatory learning whilst also incorporating this individual learner perspective. Put simply, each teacher was learning throughout his/her teaching lives. As they learned, learning became part of them – part of their habitus. Sometimes, that learning reinforced existing dispositions. The art teachers, for example, were constantly learning new ways to teach art and were developing new possible art projects and activities, but all this learning reinforced their existing dispositions towards art teaching and working in an art department. In a very different way, attempts by the head of history to introduce more collaborative working and learning in the department largely failed, because the everyday practices and learning of many of his colleagues reinforced their existing dispositional preferences to work largely alone. On other occasions, learning brought about dispositional change as when the music teachers collectively worked on how to make more use of computers and other IT in their teaching or when a geography teacher (who was a part-time member of the history department) learned to modify his teaching, following a formal learning event focussed on a new examination syllabus. This learning entailed the integration of learning in the formal course with further ‘informal’ learning which was a part of the teacher’s practice in the school, once he returned from the course.

Using this ‘becoming’ metaphor reinforces one of Hodkinson and Hodkinson’s findings that existing teacher dispositions influence both ongoing practice and ongoing learning. ‘Becoming’ adds to their original understanding because it helps make clear that learning, practice and dispositional development are ongoing and are never complete. Teachers continue to ‘become’.

From a different perspective, exactly the same point can be made about the subject departments. Much of the learning reported by Hodkinson and Hodkinson resembles collaborative and collective learning by departmental groups of teachers that cannot be reduced to the learning of individuals. During the course of the fieldwork, the department cultures and practices can also be understood as ‘becoming’. The learning done by teachers in those departments, both individually and collectively, contributed to both the reinforcement of some existing practices

and also the development of new or modified practices. Changes in departmental practice were sometimes deliberate and self-initiated. Sometimes, the changes were externally imposed such as the introduction of a school-wide drive to teach English language across the curriculum, which led to changed practices and new learning in the Art Department. Sometimes, changes arose through a largely tacit process of gradual development. In all types of case, individual and collective learning as becoming were centrally involved.

For experienced professionals, there are occasionally major changes in working practices that bring with them greatly intensified periods of learning. One common example is a major institutional reorganisation, which significantly disrupts existing practices. The result is much more intense and visible learning, likely tensions between existing dispositions and the new situation/requirements, and a more obvious period of change in the ‘becoming’ of individuals concerned, working teams and even wider organisations. Put more abstractly, major shifts in organisational practices also change the learning cultures, resulting in partly unpredictable changes in learning, which, in turn, feed back into the changes to practice.

This brief analysis of what we have termed routine professional learning also illustrates that the metaphor of learning as ‘becoming’ should not imply that learning is some sort of unproblematic linear developmental process. Becoming is partly unpredictable, erratic and uneven.

9 Professional Learning and Boundary Crossing

For many individual professionals, there are key stages in their career when they cross boundaries. This happens when they move from situation to situation, for example, from a fulltime university course to a first job, from one school or hospital to another, perhaps to get a promotion, or from fulltime work into retirement (Hodkinson et al. 2008). Within the professional learning literature, most attention is paid to the first of these examples. The concern is mainly with how education can adequately prepare professionals to work, and how the skills, knowledge and understandings developed in university can be transferred into the workplace and applied there by the new professionals. Hager and Hodkinson (2009) have argued that this emphasis on learning transfer leads to a misunderstanding of the nature of progression between education and work, and that this misunderstanding leads in turn to emphasis on the wrong issues in trying to enhance this process. So, how might the use of the learning as ‘becoming’ metaphor work better?

In a study of orchestral musicians in Australia, Hager and Johnsson (2009) show that the learning done in music school and that in the orchestra are different and apparently contradictory. In the music school, the emphasis is on individual virtuoso performance. In the orchestra, the emphasis is on becoming a team player – on ensemble work. If this transition is seen through the metaphor of learning transfer, then there is a major problem – because the music schools are not teaching the right things: the skills of ensemble playing are of prime importance to the orchestra.

Yet, Australian orchestras have been playing world-class music for many years despite this apparent problem: so maybe there is not a problem at all. The music school and the professional orchestra work in very different ways, in very different situations and with very different goals. The result is that the learning cultures of these two organisations are also very different, and one element in that difference is the focus on virtuoso playing in one, and ensemble playing in the other. Moving from music school to orchestra entails crossing a clear boundary between one situation and the other. Before that boundary crossing, the budding musician is learning in the music school. He/she is becoming a hopefully successful student, gaining high grades through better and better virtuoso playing. Towards the end of the course, the student hopes to have become proficient enough to gain a place in a professional orchestra. In turn, when recruiting new players, the orchestra wants high quality virtuoso playing, amongst other qualities. That is, they want someone who has become musically skilled enough to contribute to high quality orchestral performance. What they do not want is someone very well-trained in team work, but whose actual instrumental performance is not of the best.

Once the successful student takes up that first position in the orchestra, the move across the boundary into a very different situation with a very different learning culture results in a period of intensive learning, associated with becoming a full member of the orchestra. Amongst other things, newcomers learn to be team members and to do well at ensemble playing. Their individual learning and performing blend into the collective learning and performing of the orchestra. In doing so, they do not lose that virtuoso ability, which is a taken-for-granted part of their professional practice. Put differently, virtuoso playing ability is a necessary condition for a successful professional orchestra player, but it is not sufficient.

Using the metaphor of learning as ‘becoming’ changes the way in which the relationship between the music school and the orchestra is understood. Now, we can see two very different but largely complementary periods of learning, linked in the ‘becoming’ of the professional musician himself/herself, as he/she participates successfully in both situations, crossing the boundary from one to the other.

Kilminster et al. (2010) studied the transitions made by junior doctors in the UK, when they moved from University Medical School into their first hospital job. In this case, the learning in the Medical School centred upon the understanding and practice of medicine. However, once the doctors took up their first posts, they were unprepared to take responsibility. This was learned whilst on the job, in what Kilminster et al. (2010, p. 1) term a ‘critically intensive learning period’. As with the orchestral example, taking a conventional view of learning transition, from an acquisition perspective, places the problem firmly within Medical School education, which has, somehow not properly prepared the doctors for this key part of their role. Seeing learning as ‘becoming’ shifts the problem to focus on how doctors can be supported in taking new responsibilities when they take up those challenging first jobs. Put more abstractly, if the act of moving across the boundary from Medical School to hospital is itself seen as an intensive learning period, as part of learning to become a doctor, then it is possible to examine the whole transition process to see where learning can be most effectively enhanced. It then becomes clear, as

Kilminster et al. (2010) point out, that learning to take professional responsibility is best done whilst having to actually do the job of being a doctor. Whilst in Medical School, any focus on this is likely to be artificial and abstract in nature, and is unlikely to address the central concerns of taking responsibility in practice.

10 Professional Learning Journeys

In the examples of learning as ‘becoming’ we have examined so far, we have looked at particular situations over a relatively short professional timescale. However, whether we focus on the professional learner or the learning situation, these short periods are themselves part of much longer periods of learning as becoming. Thus, Hodkinson and Hodkinson’s schools, Kilminster et al.’s hospitals and medical schools, and Hager and Johnson’s music schools and orchestras have long histories. Current practices and current learning in those organisations/institutions can only be fully understood in the context of that ongoing history. That is, at any one time, the practices and learning in an organisation or workplace are both enabled and constrained by that past history. Put differently, learning in workplaces, classrooms and larger organisations can helpfully be understood as a process of becoming that can and sometimes should be studied at different scales of view: both large-scale investigations over short time periods and smaller-scale investigations which cover much larger time periods. We lack both the space and personal research experience to explore this in more detail here. However, we can examine this issue of learning as ‘becoming’ from the perspective of individual professionals as a learning journey of many years. In the process, it will become evident that the ‘becoming’ metaphor aligns more closely with the lifelong learning concept than do the metaphors discussed earlier.

A life-course perspective on professional learning becomes apparent when a life history approach is adopted (Salling-Olesen 2001; Goodson 2003). Hodkinson and Hodkinson recently took part in a large research project which combined life history research with ongoing interview research over 3 years. This project, called ‘Learning Lives’ (see www.learninglives.org for publications), did not focus explicitly on professionals, but one of the subjects was a school teacher who later became a researcher. Her pseudonym was Anna Reynard. We give a brief summary of part of her learning life here, before showing how using the metaphor of learning as ‘becoming’ can help us understand learning journeys like hers.

When the ‘Learning Lives’ research began, Anna was 65. She had always had a deep interest in education for its own sake and for all people. She learned from her parents the importance of good education in getting a good job, but also the love of learning for its own sake. This was part of a strong socialist, liberal and humanist value position, which was held throughout her life. She initially wanted a creative career related to languages, but having dropped out of university at the time of a serious relationship breakdown, she was talked into getting a teaching qualification.

Anna’s life since then has been committed to education, theoretically, for herself and for others – especially those whose access to it was restricted. She wanted others to share

her joy in learning. She spent much of her life as a teacher, in a variety of quite different jobs, with occasional career breaks. At various stages in her life, she studied for further qualifications: a Post-Graduate Diploma in Educational Psychology and Sociology, a short Preschool Playgroups Association course and, eventually, a PhD.

In her middle age, she worked training teachers in a Higher Education College, but eventually left, determined to work in schools again and ‘prove herself’ (her words) before returning to training teachers. The next few years were demoralising. She chose to take a temporary job in a deprived area comprehensive school. The head of the department gave little support and, Anna felt, was looking for a female college lecturer to fail. She found it very difficult to cope with the classes. She then took a job in a comprehensive school 80 miles from home, which had the sort of ethos of support for staff and pupils which she believed in. Anna fitted in well, but still struggled with the difficult pupil groups. Failure to live up to her own ideals, plus the stresses of the long journey, led to a near nervous breakdown. She then took a job in a comprehensive school in a nicer area nearer home, where she did quite well with the more able students, but not with the pupils she really wanted to help.

The latter part of her teaching career convinced Anna that although she enjoyed it, she was not fit to go back and teach student teachers to teach. The Higher Education College, which had recently become a University, was advertising a bursary for someone to do a research degree. The detailed reflective journals she had kept at the three schools where she had worked most recently provided a mass of data, which Anna used for her PhD.

Anna’s is an unusual story – but the ‘Learning Lives’ data suggests that so are the life stories of most people, when looked at in detail. The issue that concerns us here is the utility of the learning as ‘becoming’ metaphor in understanding any professional learning journey, using that of Anna to illustrate this. The first obvious point is that Anna’s professional learning continued throughout her life: she continued to ‘become’. In that process, we can see a combination of continuity – in her case, of a love of education and a desire to help less advantaged students – and change. Anna’s is a career of many job changes and, in ways not described above, of balancing family and work commitments. The detail of her story provides ample evidence of the significance of gender and social class. We have evidence of her learning at home and in relation to work, and these were sometimes inter-related. Her story also shows, especially when we examine a level of detail not possible to present here, the ways in which much of what we have termed routine learning happened, interspersed with what Kilminster et al. (2010) term ‘critically intensive learning periods’ often, but not always, associated with boundary crossing, for example, from Higher Education college to school, or from school to school.

It is possible to understand Anna’s learning as ‘becoming’ at a variety of scales. The extract above covers about 40 years of her working life. However, it is also possible to focus on much shorter periods – such as her experiences in the distant but supportive comprehensive school, or whilst working on her PhD. When we do this, the ‘becoming’ metaphor still holds. At all scales, we can see the complex interactions between Anna’s dispositions and identity on the one hand, and her positions in a range of situations, each with its own learning culture. She learned by participating in those learning cultures, which included those in formal educational settings and varied workplaces. Thus, even though the focus here is on one person, it makes more sense to understand Anna’s learning as taking place in the interactions between her and the situations where she learned, than as simply being inside of her person.

Her story also shows that whilst some of her learning was intentional, much was not. This is not just a simple dichotomy. For example, whilst in two difficult comprehensive schools, Anna was intentionally striving to educate the students. As an integral part of this process, she was learning much about how difficult this is, and about what she saw as her own shortcomings as a teacher. This learning reinforced her deeply held idealism, but resulted in a significant shift in her identity as she came to terms with what she saw as her limitations as a teacher.

What Anna's story also illustrates is that if we choose to focus on a short period in her professional life, this can only be really understood in the context of what had gone before, and would have implications for what followed afterwards.

11 Practical Implications

Using the metaphor of 'becoming' to understand professional learning leads to several significant implications for practice. Here we highlight a few of these, related to ways in which professional learning can be supported and enhanced. As we have argued, professional learning takes place in the interactions between an individual learning and the learning cultures she practices in. Improving such learning can be approached in three ways, which are inter-related in practice. These ways are:

1. Enhancing learning cultures
2. Supporting individual learners
3. Enhancing learning associated with boundary crossings

11.1 Enhancing Learning Cultures

Both in education and in workplaces, much can be done to improve learning cultures. Where successful, this increases the likelihood of learning that is both valuable and effective. However, learning cultures are complex and relational, and many of the forces acting within them lie beyond the influence of policy makers, managers or practitioners. Changing one aspect of cultural practice will often have knock-on and partly unpredictable effects on others. Despite these limitations, recent UK research suggests two strategies for improving learning cultures. The first is to make those learning cultures more expansive (Fuller and Unwin 2003, 2004), creating greater opportunities for and likelihood of learning. This is particularly significant in workplaces where opportunities to learn are sometimes very restricted by the nature of the job. For example, some of the teachers in the Hodkinson and Hodkinson study wanted to learn more about school management issues or about pastoral care, but their current job roles gave them no opportunity to engage with these issues. Moreover, at the time of the research, there were no funded opportunities for them to do this. Making a learning culture more expansive can

be done either through providing new opportunities or through making changes to the practices and procedures of the organisation – changes which workers need to respond to, and thus intensify their learning for a short time.

One common way of expanding learning opportunities at work is through the short course – often provided on or near the job. The Hodkinson and Hodkinson research showed that such courses did not always work. However, if they were valued by staff and could be easily integrated into current teaching practices, they could be of use. For example, there is little point in providing training in using computers in the classroom if the teachers being trained have no computers to use. Too often, such courses are done first so that some new equipment or procedures can be introduced later. This is implicitly based on the acquisition model of learning. Once the content has been acquired, then the new conditions can be introduced. But Hodkinson and Hodkinson's research shows that such formal learning inputs work when the content can be immediately related to the teachers' practices as in the example of the geography teacher who changed his practices after going on a course run by an examinations board. Give the teachers computers first, then find ways to enhance learning about how to use them.

The second way to enhance learning cultures was discovered in research reported by James et al. (2007) on learning in English Further Education. This research showed that learning was more effective when the forces contributing to the learning culture in a college course were synergistic rather than dysfunctionally conflicting. It follows that learning is more likely to be effective if dysfunctional conflicts between forces can be reduced and synergy enhanced. The problem here is that, in education or in work, many of the forces that might be in conflict lie outside the control of policy makers, managers and practitioners. It is difficult to imagine any learning culture without any conflicts or tensions, and perfect synergy is almost certainly unattainable. In any context, the needs of policy makers, management and practitioners are often themselves in at least in partial conflict. In the workplace, things are made more difficult because the main purpose of the practices is related to achieving the bottom line, not worker learning.

Operationalising either of these approaches to enhancing the learning culture of an educational or workplace situation entails micro and sometimes macro-political activity, around establishing what learning is to be valued and enhanced, and around conflicts between changes desirable for learning and other institutional priorities.

11.2 Supporting Individual Learning

The second approach to enhancing professional learning takes learner careers/biographies as the focus. The concern from this perspective is how to best support individual professionals in ways that are likely to enhance their learning through their careers. This can partly be done through creating challenges and opportunities to learn at work. That is, there may be ways of expanding the learning culture

in a workplace that enhance the opportunities for ongoing professional learning. The provision of more formal courses can also have value. Short courses can help learn specific content but, as we have seen, that content needs to be integrated into ongoing practice if it is to have any lasting value. Longer courses may have greater value in bringing about personal change. Some of the subjects in the 'Learning Lives' research, and some of the teachers in the Hodkinson and Hodkinson study talked about the lasting influence of long course taken several years in the past.

Personal guidance and support, in work or outside, can also be valuable, and this can be informally or formally accessed. Greater success is likely if the support centres upon the interests of the learner rather than on externally determined objectives. A common problem with institutional schemes of professional development is that they are driven by institutional needs. Where such needs do not coincide with the wants of an individual worker, the result is often strategic compliance, or even resistance, rather than enhanced professional learning. Finally, the 'Learning Lives' research showed that helping people reflect upon and construct narratives of their lives through biographical and life history methods, can sometimes help people refocus their lives, and increase their ability to achieve agency in their lives (Tedder and Biesta 2007). Personal guidance can help in this process as can some longer courses where this sort of reflective learning is built in to the procedures (Dominicé 2000).

11.3 Enhancing Learning When Boundary Crossing

Supporting and enhancing the learning done when a professional crosses a significant boundary to a new job or from education into work, entails the integration of both the previous approaches. Rather than focussing too much on the nature of any content learned in the first location, which can then, supposedly, be transferred to the second, understanding learning as 'becoming' draws our attention to the transition process of boundary crossing itself. As the examples of orchestra players in Australia (Hager and Johnsson 2009) and doctors in England (Kilminster et al. 2010) show, it is important to work out what learning can be valuably and effectively done in each of the two different situations, each with its own learning culture.

In practice, much transition learning will take place after the boundary has been crossed. Thus, the learning culture in the second location can usefully be enhanced to support the learning of newcomers. Beginning teachers, doctors or orchestral players need to be helped to become full members of the new working community. The same will be true when a newly promoted senior staff member takes up his/her post, though we are not aware of any research explicitly looking at learning in this sort of boundary crossing context. Clearly, providing personally organised support and guidance can play a significant part in enhancing such transitional learning. Such personal support might be provided in either or both locations, before and after the move, and could be formal or informal.

12 Conclusion

It is inevitable that humans resort to metaphors when they attempt to describe or understand learning. This chapter has argued that for understanding professional learning, the metaphor of ‘becoming’ offers major advantages over rival metaphors. This conclusion was established in two parts. Firstly, a critical analysis of the various metaphors and their implications demonstrated that ‘becoming’ has major advantages over common alternatives such as ‘acquisition’ and ‘transfer’, ‘participation’ and ‘construction’. Secondly, a detailed consideration of several examples of research on professional learning illustrated the value of the ‘becoming’ metaphor for analysing and enhancing professional learning.

Our support for the ‘becoming’ metaphor also has strong resonances with the concept of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning suggests that learning is ubiquitous in people’s lives. From this perspective, professional learning/development is but one strand of what might be termed a learning life. However, an ongoing problem is that, even now, lifelong learning is taken too often to be a desirable goal for learners to achieve and for educational authorities to provide. The becoming metaphor serves to correct this by reminding us that learning is an inherent part of living.

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