Negotiation and Learning in Work

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ABSTRACT

The concept of negotiation is often used in contemporary sociocultural and constructivist perspectives and theories of adults’ learning in and for work. It is used to bring a range of meanings to the description and explanation of work learning as an interactive process of active participation in and with the resources that constitute work. At its most fundamental, that interaction is between the worker and their context, between the individual and their immediate situation. At its most complex, that interaction is multiply enacted and dynamically experienced as all the resources – the personal, social, cultural, historic, material, and ideational influences – that shape work and workers’ engagement. These resources are variously mediating how and in what ways workers’ interactions can be observed, interpreted, and understood as the constant flux of reality. Across all these momentary and lifelong interactions, whether as concrete as hammering a nail or as abstract as metaphysics, the concept of negotiation supports understanding workers’ activities as interdependent with and relational to all else that is happening for, by, and to them. This support comes from the broad range of meanings the concept carries, particularly those meanings that evoke notions of joint activity in search of solution and agreement as the means of moving forward from a base of difference. Such joint activity is evidence of needing each other and needing to interact to accomplish something. So, negotiation comes to be synonymous with interaction and co-participation and, thereby, generally descriptive and explanatory of learning in and for work as social activity.

Missing from this generality of use in sociocultural and constructivist work-learning theories are the necessary explicit meanings of negotiation that illustrate and make visible the personal contributions of workers to the participative practices that constitute their work and learning. Generalisations of negotiation evidence a reliance on generic meanings that are insufficient to the task of specifying how workers negotiate their engagement in work. Consequently, the concept of negotiation remains under-theorised and thereby ineffective in current work-learning theory beyond being indicative of personal activity as interactivity with others. So, how can negotiation accurately and unambiguously support description and explanation of learning as participation? How do workers enact this participation? What personal practices evidence their enactment and how can these practices be understood as negotiation practices? Addressing such
questions is the project of this thesis. Its investigation is guided by the central question: How do individuals negotiate their learning in and for work?

This question is addressed through a qualified ethnographic methodology that focuses on workers as individuals, as persons enacting themselves in and through their work. This “person” focus, conducted over 18 months and across very diverse workplaces, enables the comprehensive examination of the personal work practices of the 12 workers who participated. What emerges from the data and its analysis presented here, is a conceptualisation of negotiation that elaborates explicit meanings that describe and explain individuals’ contributions to and outcomes of their engagement in the negotiation practices that constitute their learning in and for work.

This conceptualisation of negotiation is “the three dimensions of negotiation.” Personal learning in and for work can be understood as negotiated practice when negotiation is conceptualised across the three dimensions of (a) form, (b) frame, and (c) flow. These three dimensions are not sequenced or phased; they do not follow or cycle. Rather, they are three distinguishable but holistically integrated dimensions of negotiation, that is, analytically separable aspects of a single concept.

The first dimension, negotiation as form, presents the four primary forms of negotiation as a matrix that enables levels of workers’ purposefulness in activity and levels of outcome realisation through that activity to map and identify the kinds of negotiations engaged in through their work. The second dimension, negotiation as frame, elaborates how workers are engaged in multiple and simultaneous negotiations through their work. Some of these negotiations are pre-mediate of current activity and some co-mediate with current activity. Negotiation as frame presents these temporal and co-continuous aspects of negotiation as the personal negotiation frame in and through which workers enact their practice. The third dimension, negotiation as flow, elaborates the means of accounting for the constant state of flux that characterises work. Through the concept of transaction, negotiation as flow outlines how the person and their practice, their values and priorities and the worth these hold for them and the resources that support their engagement in work, are transforming. Negotiation is, therefore, the constant state of transformation into which workers flow as influential resources, unique among the many, that shape and are shaped by participative practice.

Elaborated in these ways, the three dimensions of negotiation enable the concept of negotiation to fully conceptualise the many interdependent and relational properties of
workers, as personal-selves-in-action, who purposefully engage in the individual and collective partnership practices that constitute their work and learning.
STATEMENT OF ORGINALITY

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Signature:        Date:
### TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ......................................................................................................................... ii  
STATEMENT OF ORGINALITY ...................................................................................... v  
TABLE OF CONTENTS .................................................................................................... vi  
LIST OF TABLES .............................................................................................................. ix  
LIST OF FIGURES ............................................................................................................. x  
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ................................................................................................ xi  
Chapter 1 .............................................................................................................................. 1  
Work, learning, and negotiation........................................................................................... 1  
  Conceptual foundations .................................................................................................... 5  
  Negotiation: A generically rich set of meanings ............................................................ 11  
  Significance of the investigation .................................................................................... 17  
  The research approach and findings ............................................................................. 19  
  Overview and structure of the thesis .............................................................................. 21  
  Contributions of the thesis to current debate within constructivist learning theory…… 25  
Chapter 2 ............................................................................................................................ 27  
Negotiation and learning: Processes and products............................................................. 27  
  Negotiation: Common process and product ................................................................. 29  
  Negotiation models and theories of learning practices .................................................. 32  
  Negotiation and learning theories .................................................................................. 33  
  Negotiation outcomes and value .................................................................................... 40  
  Negotiation types and functions ..................................................................................... 47  
  Distributive negotiation .................................................................................................. 51  
  Integrative negotiation .................................................................................................... 54  
  Negotiation and learning: Parallels and intersections of process and product.......... 59  
Chapter 3 ............................................................................................................................ 63  
Negotiation and learning: Context and conditions in relationship.................................... 63
Context and conditions: The mise-en-scène of mediating factors ........................................ 67
Context and conditions: A relational interdependence ..................................................... 74
Fuller and Unwin – Expansive and restrictive learning environments .......................... 76
Billett – Relational dualities and continuities ................................................................ 82
Context and conditions: The personal locus of action and transaction ......................... 87
Negotiation: Meanings and methods of enacting the self-in-action ................................ 97
Chapter Four .................................................................................................................... 101
Exploring negotiation through personal work practice .................................................. 101
Qualified ethnography: A logic of research enquiry ..................................................... 105
Participants and procedures .......................................................................................... 112
Data collection .............................................................................................................. 117
Data analysis ................................................................................................................ 130
Ethical issues and considerations .................................................................................... 132
Strengths and limitations of the investigation .............................................................. 133
In summary ................................................................................................................... 134
Prelude ............................................................................................................................. 137
The three dimensions of negotiation – Form, frame, and flow ...................................... 137
Negotiation as form ...................................................................................................... 138
Negotiation as frame .................................................................................................... 139
Negotiation as flow ...................................................................................................... 139
Twelve learner selves in action .................................................................................... 141
Chapter 5 .......................................................................................................................... 145
Negotiation as Form ......................................................................................................... 145
Negotiation and personal practice: Twelve worker selves in action ............................ 145
Telic and atelic negotiations – A first-level distinction of negotiation forms .............. 147
Four contingent negotiations – A second-level distinction of negotiation forms ....... 166
The four quadrants of the Personal Work Negotiation Matrix ..................................... 168
LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1 Negotiation Planning.................................................................36
Table 2.2 Acquiescent and Negotiated I-Deals............................................49
Table 3.1 Expansive and Restrictive Learning Environments.........................78
Table 3.2 Work Practice Affordances and Interdependencies .........................86
Table 5.1 Using Greenhalgh’s 7-Stage Model to Map Negotiation of a Personal Training Program.................................................................151
Table 5.2 Robert’s negotiation of outside catering functions..........................161
Table 5.3 Examples of Nested Negotiation Forms Compounded within Contingent Negotiation Forms.................................................................177
Table 6.1 Negotiation as Frame (A Structural Perspective)............................186
Table 6.2 Examples of Composite Negotiations Foundational to Current Negotiated Practice.................................................................196
Table 6.3 Examples of Contiguous Negotiations Foundational to Current Negotiated Practice.................................................................206
Table 7.1 Equations of Personal Practice.......................................................245
Table 7.2 Instances of Resources in Flow: Transformed through the Negotiations of Personal Practice.................................................................266
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1. The three dimensions of negotiation..............................................................23

Figure 2.1. The coincidence of Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning model
(inner circle) and Putnam, Wilson, and Turner’s (1990) negotiation
model (outer circle).........................................................................................................34

Figure P.1. The three dimensions of negotiation............................................................137

Figure 5.1. The telic-atelic continuum of negotiation practice.......................................148

Figure 5.2. Plotting Hayden’s work practice negotiations on the telic-atelic
continuum. ........................................................................................................157

Figure 5.3. The Personal Work Negotiation Matrix........................................................167

Figure 5.4. Mapping Hayden (H), Sid (S), and Robert’s (R) telic and atelic
negotiations using The Personal Work Negotiation Matrix.............................168

Figure 5.5. Robert’s personal work negotiation matrix as a
businessman/restaurateur......................................................................................175

Figure 8.1. The three dimensions of negotiation............................................................282

Figure 8.2. Four contingent forms of negotiation..........................................................283
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