

Preface

About two years ago, I commenced an investigation to understand how the development of occupational skills occurred before there were educational institutions for these purposes. It largely comprised reviews of literature from Early Imperial China, Hellenic Greece, Europe, Japan, Middle East and Central Asia. I also spoke to experts in history, anthropology and archaeology and visited museums in a number of countries to develop this understanding. What I anticipated was identifying instructional strategies used by expert workers to assist novices learn how to produce artefacts and provide services. Indeed, my initial concern was how I would categorise these strategies in ways which would be helpful for contemporary usage. Very occasionally, I came across instance of such strategies, but not very often. There were examples of master potters placing their hands upon those of novices to assist them develop the tactile capacities required to shape clay into pottery items, as they spun on potters' wheels. However, these instances were few and far between. Instead, other patterns emerged. There was evidence of arrangements for novices to engage in work activities incrementally and progressively in developing the capacities required to practice the particular occupation.

These arrangements had qualities that are consonant with the original meaning of the word curriculum. That is, the track of activities to progress along or the course to follow. Sometimes, this progress was assisted by invitations from more experienced workers to participate in work activities and their ordering of work activities and interactions that support novices learn those occupational practices. However, largely, the evidence suggested that rather than novices being taught or even guided, the key responsibility was for them to actively learn the occupation. Indeed, in the absence of teaching, the pedagogic practices emphasised novices' learning being directed by independent effort and indirect guidance of more experienced co-workers as the principal means by which learning of occupations progressed. This outcome appears quite consistent across the diverse cultures included in the review and across human history more generally. Hence, before there were schooled societies, teacherly processes appear to be rarely exercised.

Indeed, this evidence led me to conclude that the act of teaching is a recent one, arising through modernity and industrialisation, and the formation of modern nation states with their emphasis on schooling, compulsory education and people needing to be taught. Before then, the processes of occupational skill development were seemingly largely centred on individuals' learning. The prospect here is that across human history, rather than their being taught, the vast majority of learning associated with occupations, not to mention other kinds of learning, are largely the product of individuals' efforts in that learning, albeit assisted by what they experience, including the direct and indirect guidance of others. This proposition raises a series of issues which are beyond the scope of this brief monograph. Principally, it led to a consideration of through what processes do people learn their occupations in the circumstances of their practice.

It became evident that rather than taking institutional practices, the actions of more experienced co-workers or experts as primary bases for understanding that learning, it was necessary to focus on how novices came to learn their occupations. This conclusion led to the need to understand more deeply and be more open to a consideration of human cognition and learning being initiated, shaped and monitored by intra-psychological (i.e. those within the person) processes as well as those of engagement with the world beyond them (i.e. inter-psychological). Moreover, and of particular salience, when engaging in anthropological, developmental and historical literature, reference was made to learning arising through individuals' processes of observation and imitation. That is, learning through mimesis: observation, imitation and practice. In reading widely about this phenomenon, such processes, although not restricted to humans, emerged as something that we as a species have come to use in ways that set us apart from the others. We have particular capacities for and talents in their use it would seem.

So, to understand these processes of cognition and how they assist the learning of occupational capacities through the circumstances of practice and for the development of occupational capacities requires going beyond the current focus on and privileging how the social and brute (i.e. natural) worlds influence individuals' learning and development. Instead, it suggests a need to also consider both the cognitive and sensory processes occurring within humans as well as those being projected by the world beyond the skin. Such a line of inquiry requires accounting for processes of human cognition, sense making, and how intra-psychological processes are enacted. This includes how humans engage inter-mentally or inter-psychologically with sources of knowledge about work beyond the individual. It was this broader consideration of and engagement with anthropological and historical accounts as well as cognitive and neuroscience that ultimately led to a consideration of mimesis as imitation, observation and acting, and also the broader concept of mimetic learning which incorporates the broad array of inter-psychological and intra-psychological processes and the relations between them.

It is the account of learning through practice that is elaborated in this brief monograph by a consideration of mimesis, how humans have learnt their occupations across history and how these processes inform the initial and ongoing learning of occupations in contemporary times, more broadly conceptualised as mimetic

learning. This broader conception includes a consideration of the provision of experiences (i.e. practice curriculum), the means by which those experiences can be enriched and extended (i.e. practice pedagogies) and how individuals engage with them (i.e. personal epistemologies). Importantly, this account does not present mimetic learning as an ideal, but as an explanatory basis for understanding how much and perhaps most of learning for and through occupations arise.

The work undertaken here owes much to many sources. These include earlier research projects, their reports and publications, as well as informants in those projects who gave much time to support the research findings. Then, there is a range of literature and the authors of that work whose efforts and contributions are drawn upon extensively in this account. For this particular project, it is important to acknowledge the contribution made by the Australian Research Council through its Future Fellowship programme, and to my host Griffith University. The aim of the Future Fellowship programme is to free up researchers to engage in a substantial project and provide them with the space and resources to undertake such a project. It has been the opportunity provided by my Future Fellowship which has been so central to the opportunity for writing this book. Without that support, this research would not easily have been undertaken, nor would the initial findings of the project be published so promptly in this single author monograph.

Brisbane, May 2014

Stephen Billett



<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-09276-8>

Mimetic Learning at Work
Learning in the Circumstances of Practice
Billett, S.
2014, XV, 107 p., Softcover
ISBN: 978-3-319-09276-8