Learning interventions for mid-career transition: towards a conceptual framework

ERIC LEE

Principal Research Manager, IAL

Institute for Adult Learning, Singapore

The Institute for Adult Learning (IAL) aims to contribute to the competitiveness of Singapore by developing an effective, innovative and responsive Continuing Education and Training (CET) sector that is able to meet the needs of industries and the workforce. It achieves this by raising capabilities, catalysing innovation, and leading research in workforce learning.

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Abstract

It is estimated that at any one time, 40 million Americans are in some form of career transition (Arbeiter et. al., 1978). With the onset of globalisation, we see an increasing occurrence of skills becoming obsolete and transformation of industries (Greenaway, 2008, Falvey et al. 2008, Gaston & Nelson, 2004, Kletzer, 2004). Growth sectors, brought about by the aging population, technological advances and economic restructuring, provide attractive alternative vocations that also give rise to transnational and in-country labour market shifts (Upward, 2008). These inevitably lead to career transitions being on the rise, including positions for Professionals, Managers, Executives and Technologists (PMETs). There has been extensive research in career theory on the 'protean career' (Hall, 1995, Arthur, 1999 and Super, 1980) advocating a lifelong series of learning stages for various vocational dispositions. These recent studies have attempted to connect adult learning to life transitions (Brown et. al., 2010). This research, however, has been mostly biographical and limited in theoretical development.

This study addresses the learning processes of adult learners who go through a career transition in the context of the Singapore economy and Singapore's Continuing Education and Training (CET) environment. It takes a case-study approach based on in-depth interviews with six cases of associate-professionals who have successfully made a career transition into three identified growth sectors in Singapore, which are healthcare (nursing), creative industries (interactive media designing) and education (training and adult education). The outcomes of the study support and inform a proposed conceptual framework to guide learning interventions for mid-career transition. This framework may then inform instructional designers, career consultants, policy designers and employers, in tailoring their learning interventions with respect to workers who are planning for and undergoing a career change.

Introduction

Past research has estimated that 5 to 10 percent of Americans change occupations each year (Heppner, 2006). In Singapore, an estimated 2,000 workers have enrolled in the Professional Conversion Programme (PCP) since the height of the global financial crisis in 2008. This does not account for those many others who choose to make a career switch on their own. With globalisation and an aging workforce, we expect this number to grow.

For this study, career transition is defined as primarily a change in occupational role (e.g. from accountancy to nursing). Secondary manifestations of a career transition may entail a change from one sector to another (e.g. from education to advertising) or a major role change within the same organisation or sector (this includes both compulsory/involuntary and voluntary changes, plus geographical location changes) (e.g. from human resource management to adult education within the education sector) (Brown et al, 2010). In terms of levelling, this study shall focus on people intending to transit *into* skilled or middle skilled, associate professional or professional occupations that require some degree of qualification. This is based on the premise that the resource and time investment by state, individual and all stakeholders involved in the transitional process is sufficiently high to warrant this investigation.

Prior research in the area of career transition has been largely dominated by the fields of career theory, career development, industrial psychology and career counselling. This widely researched phenomenon has yielded much theories based on numerous empirical studies on career decision making, career mobility and career change processes (Hall, 1995; Smart, 1997; Neapolitan, 1980). There has also been growing and widespread recognition from government agencies across the modern globalised economy for more resources to be injected into career planning and advisory services (Ecclestone, 2009; Brown ibid; Bimrose et al, 2010).

These research and current thinking allude to the fact that career transitors are a unique grouping of individuals, with particular characteristics and needs. Categorically, these individuals would be looking to make a fundamental change in their self-concept, may be experiencing identity dissonance from their immediate environment and people relationships, fearful of the unknown and undergoing some stress (typically associated with any change), and quite often, have the odds stacked against them as they assimilate into new work environments and demands. They tend to be older, working with or even reporting to younger but more experience colleagues, have relatively fragile professional networks of customers, suppliers, business associates, and tend to lag in technical proficiency and savvy (Newman, 1995). In terms of learning the requisite skills of the new job, career transitors need to learn 'better, faster and harder' if they were to build resilience and 'catch up'. This situation certainly calls for differentiated set of learning interventions and learning support. From a policy perspective, there is certainly much at stake to warrant the facilitation of positive outcomes both for the individual and the smooth functioning of the labour market (Brown et al, 2008).

However, there has been surprisingly very limited research in learning interventions for career transitors or concepts supporting learning by career transitors. There is a comparatively mature literature on transitions among

young people, and particularly on the transition from youth to adulthood and from school to work (Guile & Young, 2003; Tuomi-Gröhn, T., and Engeström, Y., 2003), but this has yet to make a significant impact on studies of adult transitions. Often, career transitors go through the same pedagogy, courseware and delivery methods designed for new graduates entering their first vocational programmes without working experience. And where the programme cohorts are for adult learners, the existing pedagogic approaches cater for learners who are already practising or working in the field and are participating in training to their upgrade their skills.

There has been growing recognition from local educational institutions to accord differential treatment for career transitors, for example there are now institutionalised cohort intakes for accelerated 2 year Diploma programmes for new entrants to nursing (everyone in the cohort is a career transitor). However, there has been limited literature and even less empirical research to inform these interventions and how they may support career transitors in their learning. This study shall make an initial attempt at filling that gap.

Therefore, this study asks the following research questions:

> Are there any measures, approaches or methods that could better support and facilitate the learning of new career skills by individuals going through mid-career transition?
> What would be the theoretical basis for informing these measures, approaches and methods?

This study will take the perspective of the learner, or the individual going through a mid-career transition. From the literature review, a conceptual framework is proposed that may inform learning interventions for this group of learners. 6 mid-career transitors were interviewed to identify any resonance with the conceptual framework proposed, or provide learner perspectives to areas for development in learning interventions catering to mid-career transitors.

Literature Review

The discussion amongst researchers in this field has mostly been from the research of career counselling & guidance, drawing from the disciplines of career theory and counselling psychology. There is wide consensus that globalisation increasingly challenges individuals and organisations alike to adopt a new strategy of career development – continuous and lifelong learning – embedded in an employment context that emphasises and rewards flexibility over the life course. Hall (1996) argues that the current high speed environment places developmental demands on the individual for two key competencies (or 'meta-skills', since they are the skills of learning how to

learn): *identity growth* (more complexity, self-reflection and self learning), and *increased adaptability*. This view is also supported more recently by Nancy Schlossberg (1981) who defined adaptation as a process during which an individual moves from being totally preoccupied with integrating the transition into his or her life.

Hall argues that if the older person has the ability to self-reflect, to continue assessing and learning about her- or himself, and to change behaviours and attitudes, the chances are much better for a successful mid-career transition and a good fit with the new work environment. Hall emphasises that the underlying message (to educators) should be one of addition (to a repertoire of abilities and backgrounds) and expansion of the individual's skills sets and capabilities, instead of remedial or in replacement of. Such approaches should hence actively recognise the Learner's past experience, skills and situational heuristics, all of which provide a rich reservoir of resource for the Learner to draw from, in the preparation of a new career.

Arthur (1999) cautions for us not to forget the economically disadvantaged, and those marginalised in insecure, low-skilled jobs, or the 'casualties' that the new employment era brings in its wake. "What the '*boundaryless* career' does offer is the promise of fresh solutions, where (amongst other considerations) learning becomes a central rather than a peripheral condition behind employment arrangements, and status and rank do not automatically disqualify people from applying their skills".

Other studies (Smart, 1997) have shown evidence that workers who successfully made a career transition can score greater satisfaction in their new jobs than single careerists. Though it may be argued that this group entered a career transition voluntarily, the choice of placement is not exclusive from workers of involuntary transition, and hence, it is very possible that such results are not unattainable for this group as well. This reasoning is also congruent with Hall's notion that the undertaking of a new career in midlife can serve as an adaptive response to the new needs and goals that can arise with adult psychological development.

There are several theoretical frameworks that I have identified to be very helpful as reference points in structuring a conceptual framework to guide learning interventions for mid- career transitors. As I review the literature, two key considerations emerge, serving as the rationale for their selection. Firstly, these choices stood out as having a strong underpinning relation to the mid-career transitors, their unique transformative personal and life circumstances and the developmental conditions of learning a new occupational role. While most do not have a direct relation to mid-career transitors, they connect well to this group of learners and provided what I assessed to be informative and constructive insights for adult educators working with mid-career transitors.

The second consideration was the emergence of common themes running across these influences. I found this indicative of the relatedness of these concepts and the commonality a firm base to build a conceptual framework. It is my aim to extract this common dimension, framed by an outcome of informing adult educators of and learning interventions for mid-career transitors, and organise it into a conceptual framework, as a starting point for further exploration and discussion.

There are four key theoretical influences I have identified that resonate with the research questions of this study. They are Mary Heppner's Career Transition Inventory (CTI), Bandura's Efficacy Theory, Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory and King Beach's notion of Consequential Transition.

Key themes for a conceptual framework

The theoretical inventories, notions and perspectives put forth by these theories provide the underpinning foundation to inform interventions intended to facilitate the learning by individuals as they transit from one career to another. They project themes of change and transition, empowerment, reflection and interaction with the (social) environment. There is first the consideration of the characteristics of the learner, the socio-demographic circumstances he is coming from, and the importance of these considerations in the initial stages of the transition. We have identified factors that predisposes the career transitor to a better chance to succeeding in the process. The individual would also do well to be knowledgeable of his strengths and limitations.

As foundational competence is being acquired, the theme of reflecting on prior principles and ways of seeing and thinking about the world through critical discourse is highlighted. Efficacious belief in own capability is also emphasised, which may be reinforced through modelling of socially recognised role models. And as the learner moves closer to the new occupational environment, developmental themes of co-construction of artefact solutions and adaptability resonate from the literature. As all transition take place on a continuum over a period of time, these emerging themes are consolidated on a time continuum to constitute a conceptual framework.

The conceptual framework focuses on the mid-career transitor as a learner journeying through the transition (see Figure 1). It is headed by a broad description of the desired states of the individual in 3 broad stages of the transition, and also proposes considerations for the adult educator and socio-structural mechanisms involved in interacting with and enabling the career transitor during this process. This conceptual framework then serves as a

basis for discussing the qualitative findings from the interviews with actual career transitors.

Figure 1: Transitional Learning Framework for Mid-Career Transition – A Proposed Concept

	Stage 1 ➔ (foundational skills training)	Stage 2 ➔ (advanced skills training)	Stage 3 (professional skills training)
Desired Learner Outcome	READY Learner is characterised by a sense of confidence and efficacy in entering a new occupation and overcoming what challenges this process entails.	REALISE Learner is characterised as projecting himself in an expanded career identity and articulates new ability in the language of the new occupation.	RESPOND Learner is able to competently and confidently discern and adaptively apply his repertoire of skills in diverse scenarios and contexts as required by the daily course of the new occupational role.
Desired state	Readiness Confidence Control Perceived support Decision independence	Identity growth (Career sub-identity is perceived as larger & more differentiated, leading to the desired self-reinforcing spiral of success)	Adaptability (Mastery of interactions of job role requirements with environment and self-directedness)

Underpinning Theoretical notions & properties	Technical & Communicative Knowledge & Learning: Content & process reflection
	Early & repeated successes in diverse contexts for efficacious mastery of experiences
	Consequential transition: Lateral, Collateral, Encompassing & Mediational transitions. Vertical development
	Emancipatory Knowledge & Learning – critical self reflection and review of habitual expectations & self concept: Premise reflection
	Vicarious experiences and efficacious social persuasion (modelling)
	Developmental Coupling
	Horizontal development

Research method

Six individual cases of people who had gone through a mid-career transition into three high growth sectors were studied. The three sectors are:

  i.   Healthcare (specifically, a transition into a Nursing profession);
  ii. Training and Adult Education (specifically, a transition into the role of an Adult Educator); and
  iii. Creative Industry (specifically, a transition into the role of a Digital Animator).

Their experiences through the transition were documented from an interview with each of them. The interview durations ranged from 31 to 67 minutes each, with the average length just over 42 minutes.

The criteria for recruitment of participants are that they should have gone through a career transition into a different occupational role fairly recently (in the last 5 years), and have been working in the previous occupation for a substantial duration. The participants for the study were recruited through referrals from training providers or through personal contacts. The overall aim of the interview was to explore and draw from the participants their learning and life experiences of the transition, their motivations in the initial phases of going into the transition process, the positive and negative aspects of their learning process in preparing them for their new occupational role and what were the challenges they faced in their new roles. The qualitative data was analysed thematically using a grounded theory approach and categorised by its content into the broad topical themes of the proposed framework: *Ready, Realise and Respond* (Dowling & Brown, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Kvale, 1996).

Findings and discussion: Emerging Issues

The interviews with the participants have illuminated pertinent areas with relation to concepts presented in the *Ready-Realise-Respond* conceptual framework proposed. Some areas that came up however, do not feature in the original model. These areas highlight further inclusions to the proposed framework for exploration.

Ready

When the interviewees were asked about how they had come about to making the decision make a career switch, all of them always conveyed about a passion, an interest or a calling. Some accounts would be described in a deeply intuitive sense, with one participant stating "something in me just says is this something I had to do". There were also accounts describing that it is this passion that would sustain the individual in the career in the long run.

It was also observed that there was embedded in these descriptions a dimension of self-awareness. Two of the interviewees highlighted the notion of authenticity in the decision of the career transitor's to enter a new profession. This state of authenticity describes an internal awareness by the career transitor himself of the reason for his choice of career and for wanting to make a transition.

In interpreting qualities of interest and passion, I found it a challenging notion to operationalise. An individual's interest in a particular job may be attributed, in varying combinations, to various objects (the tasks or activities of the job), his own personal and individual preferences (the subject, e.g. likes activity and working with people) or the mediating artifacts connecting him to the job (e.g. sophisticated technology used by the professional, the uniforms worn, cultural norms, monetary rewards, etc) (Vygotsky, 1978). These attributes

may be transitory, as jobs change over time. It is also often a combination of diverse variables and facets of a job that interest is attributed to. Making a gauge of interest level according to these variables is also problematic. But more encompassing than this is for the individual to be critically aware himself of what these interests are, and have an internal consciousness of his intents and motivations, that will have a sustaining effect that the participants had described. Thus from this perspective, I would prefer to use *authenticity* (of intent) as a factor for ascertaining an individual's *readiness* for a career change. This may be described as a learner's conscious cognizance of the reasons and motivations for entering the chosen profession.

Another factor that emerged from the responses, which is not in the CTI, was that of being knowledgeable about the new career that the individual was joining. This would include things such as remuneration, progression opportunities, sub-specialisation options, unpleasant or mundane aspects of the job, expectations of various stakeholders, etc. These observations indicate the importance of career transitors to take ownership of their own career management and seeking out accurate information about the industry. Collectively, these sentiments suggest the importance of career transitors to be knowledgeable and almost savvy about the real job requirements, and demands of the reskilling process. In the stage of (getting) *Ready* for a transition, the qualitative data suggests for the addition of another factor of **astuteness**. This factor may be described as a measure of the knowledge of career transitors for the industry they are joining and its derivative demands and working conditions, both good and bad.

The qualitative data also provide support for the indicative factors of *confidence, support and decision independence* for assessing the career transitor's readiness to enter the transition process. But more critical, they also provided insight into the considerations career transitors themselves perceive to be important in their personal assessment of their own level of preparation and aptitude for the next career role.

Confidence

... I would say my communication was an edge for me...gives me an added confidence talking to patients, my peers, my students. (Sheela, Nurse)

...they mentioned that they learnt something from me. I enjoyed the sharing session. I was very motivated to look for new ways to reach out to people... (Lionel, Adult Educator)

Independent decision

... my opinion was more or less formed, so whatever they said it didn't really matter. (Tim, Nurse)

Realise

The qualitative data from the interviews also sheds light on the notions of self concept and role of external influences and factors in contributing to the individual's sense of identity. In the course of their descriptions, the influence of role models was raised by career transitors entering nursing and digital animation. On self-concept, the participants described a process of reflection and eventually come to a conclusion of who they are as a professional and how they would likely describe themselves professionally. One of the participants associated the self-concept with the responsibilities and accountabilities of the job role, describing this facet of the transition as being significantly challenging. This was his point of *realisation*. Another participant touched on Mezirow's notions of *habits of mind*, heuristics and mental frames by which we see the world. His description suggests that mid-career transitors bring with them different perspectives and 'systems of logic' to how things should be done. The acquisition then, of new paradigms and systems requires a suspension and sometimes review of prior thinking of how things work.

Respond

When participants were asked on what aspects of their work they felt were useful to their transition process, or what they hope they had experienced, many responses were related to the area of professional attachment to an organisation and deployment in authentic work situations. One of the

participants also highlighted that the attachment exposes the learner to more experienced practitioners, and provided opportunities for modelling.

Accounts from the interviews also describe the notion of developmental coupling put forth by Beach. The Learner, who develops his or her array of skills through application, learns to adapt those applications to the audience or rules of operation at the workplace. The audience and rules of operation also changes and develops (the adult educators' audience of learners, the colleagues at work and work processes that innovate and evolve to be more efficient) as the learner applies his skills. There is a dynamic interaction between audience and learner affecting the development of both parties. This supports the advantages for learners to be immersed in authentic workplace contexts to apply their skills in realistic scenarios, there developing the metaskill of adapting learnt skills in diverse and authentic workplace contexts, which in turn reinforces a sense of efficacy for the demands of the new vocation.

These descriptions suggest that one's *adaptiveness* is correlated to the level of proficiency of the practitioner. However, it may be argued that this could be attributed to the nature of the vocation. Certainly this may vary across occupational groups, but this observation sheds light on this variability. Attention should be paid by learning interventions to acknowledge that different occupations will have varying demands on the incumbent's ability to adapt, and how this metaskill varies as a function of the individual's proficiency and effectiveness.

There is also a description from a participant alluding to the notion of collateral transition, where workers shuttle between vocations (airline inflight service crew who also train new staff half the work-time). Practitioner-educators, writer-actor-directors, politicians-industrialists are all examples of such vocation arrangements. The notion of collateral transition makes an argument against most existing models of the transition process from career development theory, which purports three phases of a rite of passage: separation or disengagement; transition; and incorporation or re-engagement. Another similar model consists of endings, a 'neutral zone' or 'in-between-phase, and beginnings. In light of our discussion so far, the consequential transition typology of Beach and in particular collateral transitions, and the notions put forth by Hall, of expansion of one's skills repertoire rather than a replacement of, challenges the traditional models of career theory.

Conclusion

In a landmark study of the changing patterns of working, learning and career development across Europe in 2007, Alan Brown & colleagues found that *almost one third* of the 1148 associate professionals surveyed from ten

European countries, were actively considering a career change over the next five years. Further, of the same population of respondents, *over two thirds* had had *at least one* career change since starting work. If we considered the global trends of technological-economic-industrial advancement, organising the work nucleus towards multi-role occupational profiles, ever changing global centres of industry and commerce of respective trade sectors, and (the impetus of economic reintegration with) a more matured workforce, there is clear evidence that *this* trend of changing career trajectories amongst associate professionals and middle skilled workers will exacerbate in times to come.

We have discussed that it is a long and arduous journey ahead for any individual embarking on a career transition, a group that tends to have '*the odds stacked against them'*. However, it cannot be emphasised enough that adult educators of career transitors must appreciate that their audience come from diverse prior professional backgrounds. Their years, and for some, decades of work experiences, have set and internalised multi-layered paradigms of logic and *habits of mind* through which they have come to understand their world of work and the relationships of its interacting components. It is argued then, that an assimilation of new social and relational systems of logic and schemas associated with a new career requires reflection and reassessment of these prior assumptions. There is also literature supporting the view that reflection upon experience (and prior learning) can act as a driver of further learning. This distinctive dimension of the learning by mid-career transitors adds to the complexity of the transitional process, and certainly warrants further research to understand it better.

An initial 3-stage conceptual framework is proposed in this study as a first attempt to guide adult educators and the design of learning interventions for individuals undergoing a mid-career transition. The stages of the framework, *Ready, Realise and Respond,* centre around the learner and describe the desired learner outcomes arising from the stages. Interviews with the participants of the qualitative study have suggested 2 additional factors that may be considered for inclusion in the first stage: being *astute* and savvy of the industry and job they are entering into, and the learner's *authenticity of intent*, which may be described as a self awareness of the learner's own motivations and aspirations for entering into the chosen career. The qualitative data from the interviews has illuminated that these stages are not necessarily exclusively sequential, and would usually overlap.

As a first iteration, the proposed conceptual framework certainly has much room for further development in reviewing other theoretical notions and broaden empirically to include perspectives of adult educators; training institutions (management representatives); state, funding and policy design agencies; career advisory centres and career consultants; and even

organisational human resource personnel who are tasked with conducting exit interviews of transitors who fall out of the process. Their perspectives would certainly enrich the depth and relevance of the framework to all parties involved in facilitating career transitions.

From a policy perspective, growing evidence suggests that the imperative for appropriate support systems and targeted learning interventions for career transition is real and increasingly pressing. Our research participants have shed light that the transition process does not *always* work out for all individuals, or present unexpected challenges and barriers only after the learning portion is done. Research based on biographical accounts have also shown that such cases run the risk of fostering a mindset of permanent disengagement from learning altogether where such interventions fail (Brown et al, 2010), leading to greater societal costs and labour market disequilibrium. These studies alert us to the criticality of designing policies that while providing maximum opportunity, must also be sensitive to the diverse aptitudes, motivations and aspirations of working adults. Lifelong learning policy must also facilitate the capacity of individuals to discern the appropriateness of their own career trajectories, if the aim ultimately, is to help people become all they can be.

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