# To 'become' one: Developing professional identity through learning at work

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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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There is a shift away from the perception of learning as the mere passive acquisition of knowledge to thinking of learning as a contextual, embodied and social process that also involves individual cognition. In the vocational education and training sector, where competency-based training programmes aim to prepare individuals for the workplace, opportunities for such learning can come from immersion in the workplace and participation in work tasks. Through engaging in the activity of work alongside co-workers, individuals gain a better understanding of what their profession entails, develop the competencies required and gradually construct professional identities in relation to their communities of practice. It has been argued that the dual process of learning and becoming in the workplace are intertwined, and that the same components influence both processes. Drawing upon interview and observation data collected as part of a wider project on workplace learning and assessment, this paper examines the ways in which trainee hotel chefs and nursing home healthcare assistants develop professional identity through learning at work. We propose that individuals learn and thus become professionals and identify with the profession in their respective fields by trying new work practices and sharing ideas with others, and that these processes are supported or constrained by workplace affordances and individual agency.

## Introduction

Learning about work is closely interrelated with learning about identity (Pratt, Rockmann & Kaufmann, 2006) and experiences during vocational training play an important role in initiating and facilitating learning in these areas (Cohen-Scali, 2003). In competency-based training programmes, such as Singapore's Workforce Skills Qualifications (WSQ), opportunities for such learning occur in workplaces which can be "powerful learning environments" for vocational trainees (Collin, Paloniemi, Virtanen & Eteläpelto, 2008, p. 192). Through undertaking work tasks together with colleagues in the same space, trainees familiarise themselves with the values, norms and practices that are valued by their profession and with how they are enacted in specific workplaces. This helps them to answer the identity questions of 'Who am I' and 'How should I act'.

The data from our research project was originally collected to understand what and how WSQ trainees learn at work (Bound & Lin, 2011), but the topic of professional identity also emerged during our analysis. This is because "people become through learning and learn through becoming" (Hager &

Hodkinson 2009, p. 633). Like the identity work in organisation studies, where emphasis is placed on becoming rather than being, our interest lies in the process through which individuals learn and develop their own professional identities. In this paper, we examine the development of professional identity through workplace learning, and identify the components that support or constrain both processes. Components which according to Virtanen, Tynjälä and Stenström (2008) are identical. We adopt a socio-cultural approach that "views the poles of sociocultural processes on the one hand and individual functioning on the other as existing in a dynamic, irreducible tension" (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995, p. 84). For us, this involves acknowledging that "professional identity negotiations take place in a close interplay between individual agency and social suggestions of workplace practices" (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2009, p. 17).

## Literature review

Across various disciplines, there is a growing interest in understanding the myriad of identities individuals hold, specifically how these identities (e.g. ethnicity, gender and age) are enacted in different settings. In the literature, the complex and multifaceted concept of identity is often described, but rarely defined. These descriptions of identity are mainly made in relation to its characteristics or to how it is constructed. At one end of the spectrum, identity is understood as a fixed and unchanging characteristic that resides in the individual throughout his/her life course. At the other end, identity is treated as "a temporary, context sensitive and evolving set of constructions, rather than a fixed and abiding essence" (Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas, 2008, p. 6). When the latter perspective is taken, the construction of identity is seen as a fluid process that occurs within specific contexts.

For this paper, our focus is on professional identity, broadly defined as one's sense of self that is connected to a particular vocation (Collin, 2009). Unlike other representations of one's self, a distinctive feature of professional identity is its reference to work. It develops through interaction with the working world (Cohen-Scali, 2003), and involves the subjective assignment of meaning to one's work (Olesen, 2001). The construction of professional identity is both social and personal (Virtanen et al., 2008). From a socio-cultural standpoint, this can be seen as a process that "emerges through a subject's personal intentions, goals and ideals, all of them being intertwined with the subject's learning through the communities of professional education and working-life experiences" (Eteläpelto & Saarinen, 2006, p. 158). As individuals learn, they construct and reconstruct knowledge and skills as well as themselves (Hager &Hodkinson, 2009). The idea of learning as becoming can help us gain a better understanding of how individuals develop their own identities. Hodkinson, Biesta and James (2008) explain that individuals become through

learning as they move from one learning culture to the next. For them, this process is situational in nature.

According to the situated theory of learning literature (Lave & Wenger, 1991), learning is a social process of participation in activity that is mediated by context. Depending on one's theoretical framework, the context of workplace learning can be as broad as the historical, cultural and political environment of the industry or as narrow as the immediate social atmosphere of a particular organisation. This context influences workplace affordances which "comprise the degree by which individuals are invited to participate in and learn through work practices" (Billett, 2011, p. 66). Within the situated theory of learning, context refers to the community of practice in which individuals develop work practices and identities (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham & Clark, 2006). In their article on learning and the construction of identity at work, Collin et al. (2008) highlight that the constraints on these two processes are mainly social, and stress the importance of active participation in work practices within a social community. This was also a key finding in Campbell, Verenikina and Herrington's (2009) case study of how an individual transitioned from the nursing to policing profession. Handley et al. (2006, p. 651) note that this form of participation involves meaningful activities "where meaning is developed through relationships and shared identities". It is through participation in the social practices of work that individuals learn how to talk, act and relate to others and therefore ultimately, how to be (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In addition, as individuals shape and re-shape their ways of knowing and sense of self, this impacts how they participate, and eventually leads to changes in work practices (Billett, 2011).

While contextual influences are important, one critique of the situated theory of learning is that in entrenching the individual and the processes of learning and becoming within a particular social context, the individual's voice and its effect on the community is neglected. However, it is necessary to consider intentionality and subjectivity when examining how workers learn and develop (Billett & Somerville, 2004). Within the socio-cultural perspective, there are authors who acknowledge the role of the social context in mediating learning and the construction of identity, but place greater emphasis on the role of individuals' engagement in work practices (e.g. Billett, 2011; Eteläpelto & Saarinen 2006). Their view is that in trying to understand learning and identity, "individuals cannot be merely viewed as being subjected to social suggestions" (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2009, p. 18). Instead, they recognise that individuals exercise their own agency when using the mental and physical tools that are available to construct new knowledge and identities. This agency is shaped by personal histories and dispositions. As such, even within the same environment, the extent and quality of engagement in work practices is not uniform (Billett, 2011). As shown in

Vähäsantanen and Billet's (2008) study with vocational teachers who were faced with educational reforms, individuals are active agents who negotiate their professional identities by adopting different strategies.

In this paper, we understand professional identity as personally identifying and being identified with the specific knowledge, skills and attitudes that are core to one's immediate work and with the occupational group in general. We take the position that the development of professional identity takes place through learning at work, and that these processes are supported or constrained by the relational interdependence between workplace affordances for learning (shaped by norms and practices) and how individuals construe and construct what is being afforded (shaped by their subjectivities and agency) (Billett, 2011). Our focus here is on the workplace learning experiences of vocational trainees who are completing or who have recently completed their training. Even though trainees start forming their vocational and professional identities during their vocational training, few studies have focused on this group of learners (Virtanen et al., 2008). As we draw on empirical data to examine how trainees learn and develop identities at work, we strive to contribute to the above mentioned gap as well as to more general understandings of identity construction, another aspect that is lacking in the literature (Alvesson et al., 2008).

## Research method

Our investigation of WSQ workplace learning and assessment comprised in-depth case studies in four workplaces: 1) a hotel, 2) a nursing home, 3) an aircraft maintenance company and 4) a café (Bound & Lin, 2011). These workplaces were selected because they are from industry sectors with leading practice examples of workplace learning (Bound & Lin, 2010). Each case study involved a document analysis of the organisation's training and development policies, semi-structured interviews with trainees (n=10) and their supervisors (n=8), and observations of trainees as they engaged in daily work tasks. The trainees were training to become professional chefs (n=3), healthcare assistants (n=2), aerospace technicians (n=3) and baristas (n=2). While all four case studies offered useful insights, this paper will focus on the experiences of trainee hotel chefs and nursing home healthcare assistants because they provide an interesting contrast to how workplace affordances and individual agency influence learning and identity development at work. Exploring and comparing workplace learning and professional identity across different fields of work is important as each offers different learning environments (Virtanen et al., 2008).

## Background information

The three male trainee chefs (pseudonyms Eric, Wei and John) were at different stages of their two-year WSQ Advanced Culinary Placement Diploma. This programme has six modules, and each requires trainees to spend one month with the training provider followed by three months of work apprenticeship in a kitchen. Eric and Wei were full-time employees at the hotel and John was there for his apprenticeship. While the chefs were still trainees, the two female trainee healthcare assistants (pseudonyms Min and Jo) had recently completed their two-month Healthcare Assistant WSQ course with an in-house training provider. The programme involves six skills-based modules in a classroom with facilities that simulate a ward. Towards the end of their programme, trainees undergo four days of on-the-job training. After they graduate, they are placed in a healthcare facility for a probation period of three months. At the time of our interviews and observations, Min and Jo were on their probation in different wards within the same nursing home. The chefs' apprenticeship and healthcare assistants' probation were primarily analysed from a working life perspective as there was little input from the training providers while they worked in the hotel and nursing home.

# Findings and discussion

This findings and discussion section examines how trainees develop professional identities through the learning they engage in at work, and identifies the components that support or constrain workplace learning and thus the development of professional identity. As "identity is constructed at the intersection of the social and the individual" (Collin 2009, p. 24), we take into consideration both workplace affordances, including interaction with and support from others, and individual agency.

## Learn and thus become by trying new work practices

Individuals draw on what they already know and can do to help them make sense of their work tasks. This includes their existing knowledge and skills as well as prior experiences. Both trainee chefs and healthcare assistants reflected that their WSQ programmes have been useful, "*whatever I learnt from my course for the two months, I can apply it in my first day down there, means like turning patients, shifting them, feeding them or bring[ing] them to exercise*" (Min). However, unlike in classrooms, activities in workplaces involve not only the task itself, but also other essential elements such as workflows, time pressures and interpersonal relationships. The uniqueness and changing nature of each job and workplace makes it difficult to specify the knowledge and skills required for practice in advance. In order to successfully do their work, trainees need to engage in the "renovation and expansion of previous knowledge via the experience of dealing with new situations in new

settings" (Hager & Hodkinson, 2009, p. 620). Through practicing and mastering non-routine tasks, trainees construct new knowledge that help to close the gap between what they already know as trainees and what they need to know as professionals (Billett, 2001).

At work, trainee chefs were able to try out and practice new cooking techniques and recipes, an essential part of being a professional chef who produces high quality food. Their supervisor informed us that he encourages them to experiment, "*we always say you can try*", and looks forward to discovering how creative they can be. There is space for additional practice without the pressures of daily work tasks through preparing meals for the executive chefs to try during lunch and informal competitions where everyone produces a dish and the best one is featured on the menu. Besides the workplace setting, the nature of learning at work is also determined by the ways in which individuals construe and construct what is afforded to them (Billett, 2011). Trainee chefs demonstrated enthusiasm towards their own learning by putting in time and effort to document and reflect on processes which were new to them. They also went on to practice the new dishes they learnt, "*so I try to practice more often and then try to get it*" (Wei). Their actions show an awareness of quality standards and a commitment to meeting them. As noted by the trainees' supervisor, such positive attitudes towards work and learning is validated and rewarded with greater opportunities to showcase one's knowledge and skills.

The affordances of the kitchen and the trainee chefs' engagement in new work practices come together in the following example given by Wei. He was able to practise making a consommé without fear of negative consequences:

*Even if it fails, I can just label it as a broth, you know chicken broth. If it is successful, I can name it chicken consommé, and so it's like you get a chance to do things like that and furthermore, you get to test yourself in a sense of making decisions, independent decisions.*

Wei can distinguish the difference between a consommé and a broth, and knows how to achieve this difference, "*it's a very precise one about temperature because the soup has to be crystal clear and the quality standard for a good consommé is once you pour it in the bowl, you can see the bottom of the bowl right from the top*". However, in order to actually produce a consommé, Wei has to first learn through his successes and failures at each step of the recipe. Job novelty has the potential to contribute to job discretion in the future as trying new practices shapes Wei's ways of knowing and builds his confidence in his own abilities as a chef who is able to make independent decisions and successfully execute new dishes, "*you trust your skill and you trust your knowledge even more*". This is important because chefs have to make decisions on the spot when faced with unforeseen circumstances, such

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as running out of specific ingredients or receiving special requests from guests.

While Wei's consommé example does not make explicit reference to support from supervisors and colleagues, this workplace resource featured prominently in our discussions with trainees about participation in new work practices. John reflected that he would not have successfully produced a potato gratin and chocolate mousse, two dishes he had no experience with, without adequate guidance from his supervisor. Eric commented that while they worked, "*they [supervisors and colleagues] will teach you along the way, they will take care of the trainee*". We also observed supervisors placing themselves strategically so that they could see what trainees were doing without looking over their shoulders. Once in a while, they walked over and checked to see how the trainees were progressing. If required, they would quietly instruct, often in Chinese rather than in English. They mainly asked questions or gave instructions on the next steps required for the dish. Both supervising chefs and other colleagues provided trainees with social and emotional support that enabled them to learn and thus develop professional identities through trying new work practices. This is indicative of the deeply ingrained value placed on developing trainees. The hotel's kitchens illustrate what a positive and expansive work community of practice that provides opportunities for learning and development looks like (Fuller & Unwin, 2004). When the trainee chefs with positive attitudes towards their work and learning were situated within this community, they were able to develop their professional identities as hotel chefs.

In contrast to the experiences of trainee chefs, trainee healthcare assistants were primarily tasked with routine work such as keeping the wards clean, feeding patients and changing them. The centre manager explained that she allocated "*simple tasks*" to Min and Jo because they did not have the medical knowledge needed to intervene if a patient's condition suddenly changes. By restricting trainees to routine performance, trainees reinforce and refine their existing procedural skills (i.e. the basic know-how), but do not create new knowledge and develop their identities as healthcare professionals who can manage unexpected situations. The position taken by the nursing home was that unless and until trainees were deemed to have sufficient medical knowledge, they could only carry out skill-based procedures. In addition, the onus was on the trainees themselves to learn this knowledge outside the confines of work. This separation of learning and work is problematic because "learning is inherently part of and shaped by its context" (Hager & Hodkinson, 2009, p. 631). The requirements of work are determined by the norms, practices and values found within a particular work setting (Billett, 2011).

Besides being assigned routine tasks, there was also a tight control over trainee healthcare assistants' decision-making frames and this extended to

simple tasks. For example, when a patient asked Jo if she could provide his meal earlier than the stipulated meal time because he was leaving the centre for a doctor's appointment, she felt that she could not make this decision on behalf of the centre. She went on to refer him to another staff even though she knew the right response. In this particular nursing home, the lack of autonomy afforded to trainees meant that they did not have the opportunity to try new practices. Interestingly, contrary to what the management had hoped, this did not lead to a safer environment for the patients. Jo recalled that she used the same tube feeding procedure with all her patients until one of them threw up his meal. It was only after she informed her supervisor that she was taught how to carry out a new tube feeding procedure, one that required her to feed the patient through his stomach instead of his nose. If like the trainee chefs, trainee healthcare assistants were provided with opportunities to try new practices with adequate guidance from supervisors and colleagues, incidents such as the one described by Jo could have been prevented. However, it is also important to consider the novelty of work practices in relation to the worker as the same situation may be novel to one worker, but not to another (Pratt et al., 2006). For workplace supervisors, recognising the tasks that are novel to each trainee requires an in-depth understanding of their existing knowledge and skills. This can be made possible through collaborative and shared practices, an idea that is discussed in the following paragraphs.

## Learn and thus become by sharing ideas with others

Learning takes place and professional identities are developed when individuals are given the opportunity to take on participatory roles that enable them to influence community-level issues (Eteläpelto & Saarinen, 2006). Our data shows that this participation involves the sharing of ideas with others.

In the hotel's kitchens, chefs often worked on different components for the same dish. This was possible because there was a sense of trust in each other's abilities, "*everybody is competent in every aspect of the dish so I don't have to worry*" (Wei). The confidence chefs had in each other can be attributed to their involvement in collective decision making. All chefs, including trainee chefs, were included in the planning process for new dishes, "*everybody's got to think of something [to contribute] too, in the processes, yeah so it's the whole team*" (Eric). This meant that everyone had a shared understanding of the thinking behind the menu and could appreciate not only 'how' to carry out tasks, but the reasons 'why' certain tasks were carried out in particular ways. Making decisions together also helps to connect an individual's identity with the group's identity (Timma, 2007). In the kitchens, there were constant exchanges between the chefs. As they prepared ingredients for the various dishes, they talked and shared thoughts, ideas and issues. Working closely with other chefs helped trainees to 'read' what was

happening around them and predict what was yet to happen. Over time, trainees saw how their roles and responsibilities contributed to the bigger picture, and were able to become part of rather than disruptive of the workflows. Trainees felt *a sense of belonging*" (John) and this had a positive impact on their identity as chefs from the particular hotel.

Teaching and learning was perceived by the chefs as a two-way process with trainees learning from more experienced staff and these staff learning from trainees. Even though they were at the bottom of the hierarchy, inputs from Eric, Wei and John were welcomed and valued. Eric gave examples of how his supervisor took on board and implemented his suggested changes to the garnishes and stock making techniques. In more formal settings, they held monthly training sessions where anyone can lead the discussion. Eric showed initiative and volunteered to give a talk on organic food, and his supervisor commented that he found the information useful. Here, it was the supervisor who learnt from Eric. As trainee spend more time in the kitchen learning new knowledge and skills through collaborative work, their own and other colleagues' perceptions of them as trainees fades as they take on their professional identity. This was evident through the types of tasks supervisors gave trainees. John's supervisor deliberately challenged him to test out a new recipe within a limited time frame. To complete the task successfully, John had to understand the requirements of the recipe, the status of his ingredients, and issues of temperature and timing. Throughout the process, his supervisor was at hand to provide assistance if he needed it.

Once again, in contrast to trainee chefs' active participation within their community of practice, trainee healthcare assistant had few opportunities for collaborative work and their voices were often silenced. At the nursing home, there was a strict division of labour with little overlap between the tasks that trainee healthcare assistants and their nurse or nursing aide supervisors worked on. Individuals in various positions had clearly defined roles with specific activities that they were expected to undertake. When we conducted our observations in the wards, we saw that Min and Jo usually worked on their own. As they moved from one completed task to another, they had little or no interaction with other staff members. When trainees work alone, they are not able to clarify any questions they may have, receive on-the-spot feedback on the quality of their work, and improve their practices based on observations of and discussions with others. This social aspect of work is important not only for learning, but for the development of professional identities as both processes are social in nature. When they work in silos, trainees do not interact with colleagues and learn about how their own roles and responsibilities feed into the collective work. In addition, other members of the working staff are less likely to have a clear idea of the type of work trainees do and the challenges they may face.

Outside of their individual work tasks, nurses and nursing aides gathered together once a day before they changed shifts to update each other on changes in the patients' conditions. Having an up-to-date and shared understanding of each patient's condition is essential for the care work that healthcare professionals engage in. The safety of their patients is at stake if they do not know about their current state. However, though trainees were involved in direct patient care (e.g. feeding and changing them), the management at the nursing home did not think that it was necessary to include them in the sharing sessions. The result was that trainees missed out on opportunities for learning with and from their supervisors and colleagues, and this was a clear sign that their inputs were not valued by their community of practice. Despite this, trainees made an effort to read the main points from the shift change discussions because they recognised the importance of doing so, "*[when] it's my turn to do something to the patient, so I'll know what I am supposed to do*". The lack of influence trainees had on community-level practices was also evident when they tried to raise their concerns about the health and safety issues associated with the lifting technique used at work. They observed that the method demonstrated and practiced in class differed from the one at work:

*What we learnt from the course itself was... the hand on the back then the leg, either under the leg or under the buttock, then you need to carry them you know, you have to use your strength to lift them up, but down here what we do is hold the collar, hold the pants, we shift them like that, but... it's actually not the proper procedure, it might be you know, injuring the patients. (Min)*

However, when they approached their supervisors, they were brushed off and told to adhere to the nursing home's standards. Through this experience, trainees learnt that health and safety are not central to the daily work of healthcare assistants, and became aware that within the nursing home, they have little or no power to contribute to and influence collective practices. This example illustrates how social factors can operate in deterministic ways, and how it can be easier for some workers (e.g. nurses and nursing aides) than others (e.g. trainee healthcare assistants) to exercise their personal agency at work (Billett, 2011). The lack of learning opportunities and support for collaborative learning had a negative impact on the trainees' professional identities. This was especially noticeable in Min who appeared keen to learn and committed to the profession when we first interviewed and observed her. She was a people-orientated person, an attributed that is valued in the healthcare sector, who made an effort to interact with her patients and respond to their needs though she did not speak the same language as them. Even with the constraints and challenges on learning at work, Min took on a proactive approach towards her own learning. She actively took down notes when she learnt a new procedure, and read up on processes related to her

care work during her free time. However, over time, the lack of affordances offered by the nursing home hindered her learning and the development of her professional identity as a healthcare assistant, and she chose to resign from her position. Min's example shows that a sense of belonging or a desire to belong to a particular community is part of what participation in a community of practice entails (Handley et al., 2006).

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined the ways in which trainees develop their professional identities through the learning they engage in at work. According to Eteläpelto and Saarinen (2006, p. 159), "professional learning and identity construction are closely intertwined and thought to take place coincidentally with the participation in community". The types of and opportunities for participation are influenced by workplace affordances and individual agency as "individuals are actively engaged in remaking cultural practices, such as those required for effective work practice" (Billett, 2011, p. 70). Both trainee chefs and healthcare assistants made the effort to participate in the various work activities afforded to them by the workplace setting. However, only the chefs developed strong professional identities as indicated by their desire to stay in the same organisation but move on to supervisory positions to teach new chefs. In contrast, the healthcare assistants did not appear to identify strongly with their profession and organisation. This example shows the importance of acknowledging the context of the work setting. The hotel kitchens' expansive learning environment, which involved space for job novelty and discretion, opportunities for collaborative and shared practices, and adequate social support from supervisors and colleagues, encouraged trainee chefs to take ownership for their own work and learning, and develop a passion for the profession. On the other hand, the nursing home did not provide the same opportunities for trainee healthcare assistants to move beyond routine tasks, and participate in and contribute to the collective work. For Min, the lack of workplace affordances eventually prevented her from learning at work and developing her identity as a professional healthcare assistant, and she left her job. While this paper has focused on the immediate work context, learning and professional identity development is also influenced by wider social and institutional structures. We think of identity as "as encountered by individuals, understood as social beings embedded in organizational contexts" (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 5) as well as the broader societal context. This includes the history and social standing of one's profession. For example, compared to the chefs, the occupational group of healthcare assistants has been afforded less status, and may not even be recognised by those within and outside the group as a 'profession'. Thus, encouraging development and identification with this work community of practice can be a challenge.

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