

*Conference Paper*

# **Understanding the influence of learning on occupational mobility**

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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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# Understanding the influence of learning on occupational mobility

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## Abstract

This paper provides an understanding of the learning that supports individuals in successfully moving from one sector to another during an individual's life-course. The approach adopted acknowledges the observation by Edwards (1997) that the language of change has become a pervasive theme of our times. As a result of globalisation, new technologies, organisational restructuring and the search for competitive advantage, the discourses of professional learning reinforce that a job is not for life, and that the ability to adapt to occupational movement is now part of active citizenry. Consequently, government interventions to facilitate such transitions have become increasingly common, with the authorities seeking to introduce schemes and initiatives that manoeuvre the workforce in ways that result, inherently, in larger-scale national benefits.

This paper focuses on the factors that enable the movement of professional individuals from one sector to the next. The paper will begin with a brief outline of the political rhetoric that underpins the Singapore context for which this study is located. It then provides an outline of the research approach taken and highlights the key features of the interview method designed to learn about personal life experiences and key events related to career change of participants. It reports on the initial findings from a preliminary study of ex-teachers and ex-engineers who have successfully moved into different sectors. These initial findings provide insights on the perceptions of professional and on-the-job (OJT) learning in enabling occupational movement to inform the context and basis for future policy decisions and government interventions.

Conference theme: Professional Work and Learning.

## Introduction

For a small country like Singapore, acquiring and nurturing human talent is a matter of survival. Without much of anything else, we rely on human ingenuity and effort to build our economy and society. We have therefore made major investments in education, lifelong learning and talent development. (Lee, 2009)

Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Hsien Loong articulated the Singapore government's position regarding lifelong learning from as early as 2009 during a speech at the Singapore Human Capital Summit Opening. Underpinning this discourse is Singapore's perspective on lifelong learning; that it relies largely on the need for the workforce to be equipped with employability and learning skills so that they can keep up with economic and societal challenges. In fact a further belief like that of many other developed countries, is that Singapore sees the building of quality jobs as a lever for raising income and employability levels of its citizens so that economic and productivity growth are ultimately achieved. As highlighted by Deputy

Prime Minister (DPM), Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam in his recent National Day address,

Our key task is to achieve growth-driven productivity, rather than growth driven by an ever-increasing supply of labour... We must therefore focus on improving the quality of jobs in the years ahead, rather than growing more jobs. This productivity-driven growth - growth that involves improving the quality of jobs - is how we will raise the incomes of Singaporeans, in every job and for every skill and talent (Shanmugaratnam, 2011).

Again the implication, that there exists a causal relationship between employability and productivity growth with income increase as evidence to support this, is clear. DPM confirmed that the government was looking at achieving a 2-3% productivity growth amidst the imminent global recession that is plaguing the world economies. He likened our national productivity drive to a multi-year marathon, not a sprint which will see the concerted effort by companies, industries, associations, unions, branches of unions and individual workers supported by the government. He reiterated the government's steadfast commitment to developing a first-class CET system that will support efforts in improving the quality of every job from the simplest to the most complex, from manual or the office-bound and to positively influence widening income too. This, he feels, is integral to raising the median incomes for all Singaporeans (Shanmugaratnam, 2011).

These implications rest not only on the creation of a lifelong learning system that supports the modern knowledge economy where innovation and technical expertise hold the key to the new global competitive challenge (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2008), it also suggests it is important to consider the influences that globalisation brings to the development of lifelong learning systems at a time when the language of change has become pervasive (Edwards, 1997). It was recently reported by human resources firm Kelly Services that more than half of the 900 Singaporean respondents to its Global Workforce Index expected to switch careers within the next five years. The main causes cited were the need for higher income (32%), changing personal interests (25%) and the need for improved work-life balance (25%) (CNA, 2011). The realisation that career mobility is the norm provides the government with novel opportunities to control their labour force so that larger-scale national economic benefits can be sought through related lifelong learning-related policies and skill development initiatives. An example of such an initiative is the Skills Programme for Upgrading and Resilience (SPUR) that was created in 2008 not only to keep workers employed during the economic recession but to provide employers with subsidies and incentives to send their employees for up- and reskilling programmes. The Singapore Continuing Education and Training (CET) system was repositioned as a novel attempt to circumvent the recession and was viewed instead as an opportunity for the labour force to take advantage of the large offerings of lifelong learning programmes, thereby keeping the unemployment rate low during the period.

Lifelong learning, that underpins the CET system, has traditionally been thought of as the responsibility of the individual (Rainbow, 1991), but increasingly, it is now being viewed as a shared responsibility between the market, the state, the civil society and the individual. From the discussion above, lifelong learning is now viewed by the local government as a means of up- and reskilling the labour force so

that it is more productively and economically relevant for the longer term public good. The factors and conditions that affect and support the learning development of a seemingly mobile intellectual group and the impetus for augmenting the CET system seem integral now.

With career mobility becoming the norm and government interventions to engage the labour force in regulated mobility so that the labour force is appropriately channelled in the right emerging sectors, this study seeks for an understanding of the learning considerations and approaches that support the up- and reskilling of two distinct occupationally mobile groups. This paper discusses the findings from a preliminary study that was conducted with 2 ex-teachers (Participant 1 and 2) and 2 ex-engineers (Participant 3 and 4). The discussion was facilitated by an interview schedule (see Annex A) that encouraged them to speak about the factors which may have influenced and supported their learning patterns and preferences during occupational mobility, thereby providing insights on the professional and on-the-job (OJT) learning in enabling occupational movements so that the context and basis for future policy decisions and government interventions are informed.

## **Research methods**

The theoretical approach adopted in this qualitative research study is underpinned by grounded theory, which was developed in 1967 by sociologists Glaser and Strauss. The researcher, the primary instrument of data collection, strives to derive meaning from the interview data. The result of this study is the development of a framework that is grounded within the data and explains the occupational mobility phenomenon drawn from specific, everyday-world situations (Merriam, 2009). The data is interpreted within theoretical constructivist frameworks and applied to the way in which the subjects make sense of the world. Indeed the representation of findings is no ordinary description that anyone could provide (Wood, 1982). The research is premised by the view that our knowledge of reality is a social construction by human actors. It acknowledges that the data from the interviews are often not value-free since elements of researcher preconception may taint the process of enquiry during interaction but I shall try as much as possible to present the data as intended by the participants from the analysis and ignore the influence of personal prior experiences. Cohen, Manion, & Morriison (2000) explained that interviews are a useful and principal means of gathering information as interviews have a direct bearing on the research objectives. Walford (2001:90) calls an interview a social encounter, not merely a site for information exchange. I decided on using interviews in my research design because of their effectiveness in clarifying and confirming a person's response which, in this case, revolves around understanding the decision making that influences career change processes. Interviews provide, as Tuckman (1972) explained, access to what is inside a person's head, and makes it possible to measure what a person knows, what a person likes or dislikes, and what a person thinks. It also allows the opportunity to clarify immediately the social constructions that hold meaning to the participants. As I was mindful of the potential, as suggested by Kitwood (1977), for using interviews as a means of pure information transfer and of possible researcher bias, I ensured that professional rapport was established with the participants before questions were asked. Through this, accurate data could be obtained in a non-information transfer manner, and presented in the way that it was intended by the participants. It is also believed that this provided the assurance to

the participants that their responses will be treated in an appropriately confidential manner. From the interviews, I would therefore be able to (1) interpret an individual's occupational mobility experience, (2) identify how individuals construct their own realities within the learning contexts that they encounter and (3) identify the meanings that are ascribed by these individuals to their occupational mobility (Merriam, 2009).

The sample was chosen because of the numerous instances of occupational mobility within their career life-course. Participant 1 is now a deputy director in a fairly large organisation, Participant 2, an adult educator, Participant 3, a researcher and Participant 4, a director of a training agency. Therefore, questions like "What motivated you to join teaching/engineering as a profession?; What were the conditions that led you to join teaching/engineering as a career?" and "What are the conditions that enabled the movement?", serve to encourage discussion and the sharing of meanings and perceptions that individuals accord to their occupation trajectories and mobility, giving us insights on how personal agency is engaged within the social structure.

## **Findings and discussion**

This study agrees that workers now continually reinvent themselves to align to their business contexts. Based on the current government lifelong learning push, it assumes that workers are often prepared to learn in order to assimilate into the current global environment. I also acknowledge that while the workplace affordances may sometimes play a part in influencing mobility, this discussion shall focus only on the individual's perspectives of occupational mobility so that the personal occupational mobility experiences and career decisions can be captured and made sense of.

## **Perception of transitions**

An emerging rhetoric prevalent in our modern career culture, suggests that failure to move occupationally is taken as a sign of failure, and stability is seen as a living death (Sennett, 1999). Indeed, one of the participants pointed out the existence of this short-term society when he said people of his generation (Y) do not see being in a job as a long-term commitment. As Participant 1 asserted,

I didn't think long term in my whole career, if I did I would be in a different place now. I run my whole life with very short-term perspectives.

Participant 3 similarly had this to say about the short-term job prospects and sustainability,

At my age, staying long term in a job is not something that you associate with anymore... of course ultimately you need a job to pay the bills, as a means of living.

The destination therefore matters less than the act of departure, and this perceived necessity for mobility brings to light the argument by Sennett (1999) of the lack of opportunity which arises from short job stints. It further implies that such constant shifts bring about the development of a culture of risk-taking and fluidity that results invariably, in the inability to develop a suitable, sustained narrative which captures

identity and life-history. It creates instead people who treat uncertainty and risk-taking as challenges at work. They therefore develop ways of interpreting and negotiating their learning environment to cope with their short job experiences; and these affect not only their understanding of, and behaviour and attitudes towards, career mobility but their lifelong learning patterns and needs too.

## **Decontextualised Learning Experiences**

The participants view learning as particularistic and decontextualised. The sample identified the learning practices from their occupational history as comprising of a series of prior experiences, work preparation processes, years of experience and processes of continuous reconstruction of different individual experiences. It seems that these former teachers and engineers continually reshape their mental frameworks for understanding practice as they go along in their careers, and subsequently use this decontextualised learning to make sense of and facilitate their occupational movements. The influence of the teacher coming first into school as a student, then interacting with teacher training programmes, orientation and early career experiences within the school, all contribute to their beliefs about the role of teachers in relation to students, parents and school personnel. This provides a layered process of exposure to different forms of learning and learning contextualisation that have, in turn, been necessary in equipping them with the skills for dealing with subsequent movements to other industries.

Participant 1 explained,

I started out as a [sic] untrained, non-trained teacher. At that point in 1996 there were too many people who applied for NIE cos they became a lot more attractive and a lot more people applied for NIE so they pushed me to the school first for one year, as an untrained teacher to get experience...

The layered process of learning consists first of her experience from pure work experience in the school as an untrained teacher before formal teacher preparation training which she later attributed as integral in her subsequent occupational mobility.

Teaching does give you some very good skills. It led me to capitalise on some skills that I had. I don't know if you would traditionally call these skills but things like, I engage well with people, people of different ages, I was great with teenagers; I really enjoyed working with them, even though I was very young.

Similarly, Participant 3 took the initiative to identify gaps within his knowledge and sought for development opportunities to address these gaps, suggesting that learning can be broken down, decontextualised and addressed,

It was interesting for me, cos for the first time I thought about what I think the job is like. So what would be the [sic] skills that I need to do the job. Then having an assessment of my own capabilities at the time, identifying the gaps and then drawing up my own development plan (for future occupations). That is actually something that was quite new to me and that is actually something that I would like to take ownership (sic) and responsibility on my own learning (sic).

Taking ownership of one's own learning suggests the existence of a learning mindset that underpins and supports the conditions for subsequent transition and the

unregulated career shift. It also suggests that there is some value in breaking down learning so that it is decontextualised and provides opportunities for the individual to arrest gaps through the learning of specific skills for sustainability within a new occupation. Current literature has also begun to suggest that modern employers should be focused on providing the essential skills and training to their employees to ensure heightened levels of employability among employees, allowing for future opportunities in other workplaces (Gardner, 2005), confirming the value of decontextualised learning experiences in encouraging occupation mobility in the long run.

## **Informal Learning**

Apart from the decontextualisation of learning, it seems that the informalisation of learning is another inevitable consequence of normative systems at all levels of society (Chisholm, 2008:142). This results in the innovative negotiation and personal sense-making of learning constructs that influence the practice of work transitions. With such informalised learning structures in place, occupational mobility is thus not governed by strict learning requirements, making it easier for career courses to be negotiated individually. Participant 3 explained that his learning needs are largely determined informally by himself and subsequently taken on by the larger community of teachers if he found it beneficial,

A lot of it originated from my own needs, then I asked if there were other existing classes for this, if yes then it will be arranged for me, if no then I raise it up and if it turns out to be beneficial for the rest who are also aware that they need the kind of course/training as well...

The sample mentioned the affordances of workplace training which are often “on the fly” and informal, for example Participant 2 mentioned,

OJT (On-the-job) type training. Very much OJT. On the fly, I guess it also helped that this place had just started and I could lay down certain practices, I was the one who could put in certain expectations and certain standards, processes.

suggesting that learning need not now be within formal contexts but that it could exist informally, as and when needed. After all, as Participant 1 confirms when asked about having to deal with the changes in requirement of different jobs, that “what I have had to learn is to grapple” suggesting the informality of managing learning.

### **Individual autonomy in learning**

The modern society is viewed to be multi-dimensional and drives individual and societal innovation and change (Castells, 1996). We exist in a society where individuals not only take responsibility for their own occupational development and informally of their own learning but are also self-directed, taking charge to pursue individualised learning pathways so that workplace efficiency is fostered. As Participant 4 said,

I want to do something different from what I used to do. So maybe that is the kind of train of thought that you have done all that is related to engineering, and auxiliary type of support work (...), I want to do things that I have never done before, experience differently.

Individuals are architects of self and subjectivity; they are sociological adults who are autonomous and responsible shapers of their highly-differentiated career life-courses. As Participant 1 said,

I was starting to engineer a way out of this because I can't see myself being a teacher forever.

and in the case of Participant 2,

I got restless, cos I thought there was a whole world out there and till that point I had only been to schools.

Their prior experiences and mindsets contribute significantly to the shift in public discourse on career transitivity. As Participant 3 an engineer who is now a social science research officer, said about his engineering experience,

Engineers in Singapore just basically took care of the transfer in that they look at how to translate the product back to the country that was producing the particular thing (product). So it was not what I was interested in. So I did not think I would find it appealing to be an engineer in Singapore.

## **Ascribed meanings to learning**

Adults have widely differing dispositions towards learning. The meaning and the language used to describe the value of such learning and the thoughts that they have for such learning, differs from individual to individual. For many, it may merely be a reaction towards having to deal with changes in their lives than as learning per se. It is interesting to note that Participant 2 and Participant 4 are both embarking on a post-graduate course of study despite currently not facing any occupational change at this stage, which could be testimony of their lifelong learning inclinations, possibly as an important part of their identity and effort to stay employable. Yet the associated meanings and interactions that Participant 2 and Participant 4 have with learning and the value of a post-graduate qualification surround them in their jobs thereby providing them with the meaning and thought that is associated with attaining such qualifications so that their positions within their organisation are strengthened.

Participants 2 and 4 currently work within a national agency that promotes and encourages lifelong learning therefore their participation in continuing education may be viewed and argued as reactions to the functions of their job, which leads to the next concept of positioning. The existence of Bourdieu's concept of field is a useful way of conceptualising positions, dispositions and structures. It may be argued then that their positioning influences their meanings of learning since positions within wider social and economic contexts determine behaviours. As defined by Bourdieu, a field is "a network or configuration of objective relations between positions" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:97). Positions in the field reflect for Bourdieu, the interplay of people's resources (social, cultural and economic capital) and their habitus on the one hand, and the rules of the field on the other. All the interviewees show the impact of such structures on influencing lives and learning within specific fields. Of course such influences and structures vary from person to person, and can play a more or less significant part in a person's life.

## Conclusion

The implications for the development of a lifelong learning system that supports the learning preferences of an occupationally mobile group are clear. As suggested by the preliminary interviews, the interplay of modern perceptions of transitions and its ascribed meanings towards learning seem to greatly contribute to this contemporary realism; where occupational power is now not only largely held by the individual but could be influenced by the state for the larger economic good. Amundson (2005) and Guichard & Lenz (2005) both acknowledged the emergence of constructivism in support of an individuals' negotiation of development and change within individual careers. Individuals develop ways of interpreting and negotiating their learning environment as a result of their short job experiences; and these affect their understanding of, and behaviour and attitudes towards career mobility and lifelong learning. This paper suggests teachers and engineers continually reshape their mental frameworks and constructs for understanding practice as they go along in their careers, and subsequently use these constructs and frameworks to guide movements within their occupational trajectories. Decontextualised, informal and individual autonomy towards learning provide opportunities for the individual to pick up skills that are necessary for sustainability in a new occupation. The implications for modern employers so that subscription to lifelong learning is ensured, could now rest on providing the essential skills training to their employees in an effort to ensure greater levels of employability for future opportunities in other workplaces. Of course, positions in the field reflect the interplay of people's resources (social, cultural and economic capital) and their habitus on the one hand, and the rules of the field on the other, showing the impact of such structures on influencing lives and learning within specific fields. The paper also suggests that careers are constructed from sequences of personal and social contexts that are unique to individuals, thus creating the divergent experiences and meanings to which an individual eventually subscribes. The non-linearity of occupational development is indeed a fundamental result of post-modernism. As Hallam (2005) opines, the complex interactions that also occur between the environment and the individual can indeed influence choices, motivation and ultimately, behaviour.

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## ANNEX A

Interview Schedule (Teachers/Engineers who resigned and now in different occupation)

A: Biodata and participant history	
Age:	
Gender	

Years in Teaching/engineering:	
Year started as teacher/engineer:	
Year resigned from teaching/engineering:	
Time period from resignation to new job:	
Resigned with Job/Resigned without job	
Current job title:	
Describe what you do now:	
You are trained as a + Teacher/engineer	
Please share your Job History [from the beginning of career as teacher/engineer to present] – (Interviewer to ask: (1) length of time in each position-in years, (2) the direction of each move (up or lateral) or downward (decreased responsibility) – also can use pay as indicator	
B: Teaching related (Ascertain influencing factors)	
What motivated you to join teaching/engineering as a profession? What were the conditions that led you to join teaching/engineering as a career? (Government policy?, Community/society? Individual motivations?)	
Was teaching/engineering a long term career option for you then?	
Why did you leave teaching/engineering? What motivated you to leave teaching/engineering?	
What were the benefits of joining teaching/engineering as a profession?	
C: Current Job (amalgamating learning from previous experiences)	
Can you explain how you decided to become a ....? (measuring chance, opportunity)	
Were there specific influences that led you to this occupation? Society? Government? Personal motivations? What enabled the movement into your new job? (Measuring Coincidence/chance)	
Are there any transfer of skills learnt as an teacher to your current job? Would someone not trained as a teacher/engineer be able to do what you do now?	

Describe what you think these are.			
What are some formal and OJT learning that you had to go through in order to be able to do your new job? (training related)			
D: Perception of what will affect occupation movement			
What is most important for you? (Self motivation factors)			
Societal perceptions organisation/peer perceptions, self perceptions Value of company benefits		The importance of job security Career path factors level of exposure, visibility Family, (spouse, kids, self	
Would you ever go back to teaching/engineering?			
Would you consider going into a different area and why?			
Areas of functional competence: finance/accounting, personnel/human resource relations, marketing/ sales, production/manufacturing, research and development, teaching (Fluid professionalism)			
Were there occupations that you would like to move into but feel that you are not equipped for the move? What do you think you would need to do in order to make that a reality? [perceived accessibility of careers]			
How would you describe your professional identity now?			

