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Personal Curriculum: Worklife Learning Pathways and VET

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Abstract

To understand, evaluate and enhance how vocational education and training (VET) contributes to individuals' development ultimately requires appraising those contributions across their life courses. How VET assists and supports them through key transitions offers a means to appraise its contributions. Here, the concept of a personal curriculum is introduced and evoked to capture the worklife pathways individuals take and the contributions that VET can and should make. Drawing on a current project elaborating individuals' worklife history it is found that three interdependent contributions arise: the person, educational provisions (widely defined) and those from 'community'. The concept of personal curriculum and factors shaping are advanced here.

Keywords

curriculum, pathways, lifelong learning, lifelong education, VET

1 Worklife learning pathways and VET

To understand, evaluate and enhance how vocational education and training (VET) contributes to individuals' learning and development requires appraising those contributions across their life courses. Those contributions cannot be fully understood through accounts of immediate evaluation or analyses of outcomes associated with completed courses. Instead, how VET and other education provisions assist and support individuals through key transitions in their working life offers a means to appraise its contributions. Here, the concept of personal curriculum is introduced and evoked to capture the worklife pathways individuals take and contributions that VET can and should make. In essence, personal curriculums comprise pathways of individuals' experiences across life, their including working life. A life history approach to inquiry enables identifying the learning and development individuals engaging both between and during key worklife transitions (Salling-Olesen, 2016). Drawing on initial findings from a current project elaborating worklife histories it has been found that three interdependent contributions arise: the person, educational provisions (widely defined) and those from 'community' (Billett et al., 2021). We are reminded of Dewey's claim that "Education, in its broadest sense, is the means of the social continuity of life (Dewey, 1916, p. 2). These findings elaborate how individually and interdependently the contributions of the person, educative provisions of different kinds and affordances from community both contribute to and inhibit the development of individuals' occupational and worklife capacities. Given this complex of factors and circumstances are person-dependent, heightens the need to understand those experiences through all personal curriculums.



The concept of personal curriculum and factors shaping it are advanced in this short paper. It commences with the discussing the salience of the concept of curriculum and how, ultimately, it needs to be understood as a personal process. Then, the processes and tentative outcomes of the worklife history project are briefly introduced and described. This is followed by some observations about what this means for vocational education supporting individuals' developmental pathways.

2 Conceptions of curriculum

The original meaning of the word curriculum refers to the course to progress along or the pathway to follow (*currere* meaning "to run/to proceed"). This concept has long been appropriated by the educational discourse, practices and institutions, including VET. It includes theorisations viewing curriculum primarily in terms of experiences designed for, enacted by and afforded learners by these institutions (Tyler, 1949). Yet, this discourse, conceptions and practices unnecessarily constrains the scope, focuses and duration of educational pathways that tertiary education students, such as VET institutions take across working lives. Defining curriculum in this way variously, precludes, de-emphasizes and ignores perhaps the principal pathway associated with human learning and development, and collective education provisions: i.e. individuals' personal pathways or curriculums. Beyond what is defined through the educational discourse are the pathways of learning that individuals take. These include the experiences and interactions in which they engage, the intentional and unintentional engagement in societal practices, including education, and increasingly work, community and family life across adulthood. That discourse defines these as extra-curricula. It is these person-dependent experiences that comprise individuals' curriculum processes and pathways. Despite their centrality and legitimacy, including individuals' engagement with, benefits from, and outcomes associated with educational programs, these are just one set of learning and development experiences with which individuals engage across their lives. And these often become of decreasing importance across lengthening working lives, despite forays into continuing education and training.

Much of societal, governmental and professional/occupational focus, efforts and resources, are directed towards the institutional practices in schooling and tertiary education. Yet, ultimately, factors comprising personal agency, intentionality and capacities are equally, if not more, important in what is experienced through their personal curriculums. What comprises the intended and enacted curriculum is ultimately mediated by individuals' experiencing of them from which they construe and construct meaning (i.e., the experienced curriculum). Hence, the educational discourse's conceptions of curriculum are quite subordinate to the personal curriculum. Indeed, the compartmentalisation of education into separate and discrete sectors (e.g., early childhood, primary, secondary, tertiary, adult) demonstrates the super-ordinance of the personal curriculum as it transcends these discrete sectors, albeit in diverse and heterogeneous ways across individuals lives.

The concept of personal curriculum or pathway across working life are central to the purposes and practices of vocational education and training (VET) and lifelong education/learning. The aim here is to position VET as intended pathways enacted to assist individuals progress along the worklife learning trajectories for personal curriculums. Beyond conflating initial and ongoing vocational education as stages on those pathways, deliberations about how VET is conceptualised, positioned and enacted to more broadly support individuals' progression along their lifelong learning pathways.

3 Salience of personal curriculums

Understanding, explaining, and elaborating how individuals' learning and development can be supported and guided across the life course is an important educational, developmental and societal concern. As developmental theorists have long argued (e.g. (Baltes & Staudinger,

1996)) such accounts are necessary for understanding how individuals' personal heritages, social circumstances and opportunities shape development across the lifespan. Yet, this field of theorisation and escalations to VET are underdeveloped. Most developmental theories focus on early childhood and adolescence, and only a few (i.e., Erikson, 1959; Kohlberg, 1976) extend into adulthood. Yet, these accounts are quite dated and specific in their focuses. The personal curriculum seems important for four key reasons.

Firstly, we need to know the learning and developmental pathways individuals take across their (working) lives to most adequately provide guidance and support for realising their goals and also what their community, workplaces and governments want. In earlier times, these pathways were perhaps more predictable and linear. Yet, such linearity has been disrupted by greater mobility, engagement and disengagement from educational provisions, transformations in occupations and employment and changing ways of working and work (Billett, 2006). These personal pathways, like other forms of curriculum, have intentions, enactments and processes of experiencing that individuals negotiate, reshape and reform across the working lives.

Secondly, existing conceptions of curriculum (e.g., educational, practice) cannot, and probably are increasingly inadequate to capture or inform the lifespan development including the kinds of transitions adults make across working lives. Conceptions of curriculums need to accommodate the kinds and impacts of transitions confronted across individuals' working lives and how these shapes their negotiation of subsequent transitions.

Thirdly, both the educational and practice curriculum privilege institutional affordances as they largely comprise social suggestions projected from the immediate social world. However, personal curriculums capture how individuals engage with what is afforded them. This includes their decision-making about participating in education, work and community, including how they direct their energies and participate and exercise their intentionalities.

Fourthly, emphasising the personal curriculum places centre stage the activities and interactions that individuals engage with across the life course, and in ways that cannot be accommodated by the educational discourse only.

So, we need to understand the kind of pathways that are created and journeyed along by working age adults as these become increasingly central concerns for the development of human capacities and contributions across the working lives.

4 Worklife learning pathways and VET

In the current study, 30 informants from diverse occupational classifications, from across gender and ages, each provided retrospective accounts of their work-life history of learning (Billett et al., 2021) through two interviews, capturing over 200 instances of work-life transitions. How these informants negotiated these transitions provided insights into how support and guidance was afforded, and they negotiated these transitions. These transitions were found to be precipitated by changes in: i) life stages, ii) employment status, iii) occupations, iv) relocations, v) health, and vi) personal preference or trajectories. To negotiate each of these kinds of transitions and combinations of them that confronted individuals there was a need for them to learn specific kinds of knowledge. From analyses of individuals' negotiations those transitions the learning they required was categorised into five kinds and about:

- i) *Language and literacy* – language skills and capacities, both spoken and written, were evident in trajectories of the informants, albeit in quite different ways.
- ii) *Cultural practices* – the norms, forms, and practices associated with a nation's political, social, or educational systems, institutional mores, occupational requirements, and individuals' associations (e.g., family tradition, faith).

- iii) *World of work* – awareness of requirements for paid employment, including being productive, punctual, reliable, solving problems, and responsive to those who employ and understanding of different occupations and career pathways.
- iv) *Occupational skills* – associated with the occupations in which individuals are employed or seeking to be employed.
- v) *Work-life engagement* – Learning about work-life involves individuals' responses to and engagement in work as their circumstances change or are changed. Requires adults to fit their working life in with other priorities.

Ultimately, it was found that the key factors associated with their learning of this knowledge all were threefold: i) themselves as learners, ii) educative experiences and iii) contributions from community. Beyond individual agency and intentionality and educational provisions, what is afforded by communities in which adults engage variously sanctions, supports, provides access to opportunities, and augments adults' learning and development. In all, it seems that individual effort, educational provisions alone are insufficient and support and guidance from beyond them was necessitated and found in their communities.

5 Implications for VET

It was found that these individuals' personal curriculums are personally defined, societally shaped, and framed by brute facts of maturity (e.g., ageing). Their learning and development are mediated by personal agency and intentionality, interdependently with what is afforded by educational provisions and 'community'. Some of the implications are that lifelong educational provisions need to be cast broadly (i.e., beyond provisions of educational programs, e.g., CET, Adult Education), to include the range of experiences that are inherently educational (e.g., in and through work practices, 'apprenticeships', support and advice from others). All of this seems salient for VET as working-age adults, workplaces, and tertiary education systems face the challenges of securing individual employability, workplace viability, and an adaptable national workforce in an era of continuous change and disruption. These needs and responses to them can only be understood fully from the perspective of individuals personal curriculums.

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