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# 'So, what did you do?' A performative, practice-based approach to examining informal learning in WIL

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## Abstract

A growing body of research in work-integrated learning (WIL) demonstrates the importance of industry experience for student learning. Much of this research however focuses on individual, formal learning that occurs in WIL programs typically captured through assessment. What is less visible is the informal learning experienced during placement. In this paper, we argue that such omissions are suggestive of the incommensurability of the standard paradigm of learning with informal learning. The standard paradigm limits informal learning by privileging individual, cognitive processes of recall, thereby casting experience as "static and sedimented, separated from knowledge making processes" (Fenwick, 2009, p.235). This paper offers an alternative approach to understanding learning, by drawing on a relational ontology that emphasises how "everything that is has no existence apart from its relation to other things" (Langley & Tsoukas, 2010, p.3) and using a performative practice-based approach. Through a relational, performative approach, this paper demonstrates the utility of examining enacted and embodied knowledge (or knowing) in order to better understand informal learning. Ethnographic vignettes are presented of three commerce interns on WIL placement. Using data from observation, interviews and collection of artefacts we draw attention to the under-acknowledged, embodied and socio-material dimensions of student learning in WIL. By shedding light on this approach, we offer the usefulness of a practice-based lens and a focus on socio-materiality for researching overlooked areas of WIL

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ABSTRACT

A growing body of research in work-integrated learning (WIL) demonstrates the importance of industry experience for student learning. Much of this research however focuses on individual, formal learning that occurs in WIL programs typically captured through assessment. What is less visible is the informal learning experienced during placement. In this paper, we argue that such omissions are suggestive of the incommensurability of the standard paradigm of learning with informal learning. The standard paradigm limits informal learning by privileging individual, cognitive processes of recall, thereby casting experience as "static and sedimented, separated from knowledge making processes" (Fenwick, 2009, p.235). This paper offers an alternative approach to understanding learning, by drawing on a relational ontology that emphasises how "everything that is has no existence apart from its relation to other things" (Langley & Tsoukas, 2010, p.3) and using a performative practice-based approach. Through a relational, performative approach, this paper demonstrates the utility of examining enacted and embodied knowledge (or knowing) in order to better understand informal learning. Ethnographic vignettes are presented of three commerce interns on WIL placement. Using data from observation, interviews and collection of artefacts we draw attention to the under-acknowledged, embodied and socio-material dimensions of student learning in WIL. By shedding light on this approach, we offer the usefulness of a practice-based lens and a focus on socio-materiality for researching overlooked areas of WIL.

*Key Words: Informal Learning, Practice-Based Approach, Work-Integrated Learning*

*Research Paper*

Investigations in work-integrated learning (WIL) continue to grapple with diverse areas of concern, across multiple stakeholder groups. In recent years, studies from employers viewpoints, for instance, have examined organisational expectations of graduates (Partick et al., 2008), models for WIL partnership (Villers & Mackisack, 2011) and workplace supervision (Karlsson, 2010). From the perspective of educational institutions, research has examined areas such as WIL design and pedagogy (Martin et al., 2012), ethical practice (Campbell & Zegwaard, 2011), assessment and evaluation (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2010), and challenges such as resourcing (Bates, 2011; Martin et al. 2012). Investigations that place students as the 'phenomena' of interest, often gather around generic or professional skill development (Freudenberg, Brimble, & Cameron, 2011; Stengel et al. 2010) and learning through reflection (Griffin, Mirchell & Lorenz, 2010; Lucas & Fleming, 2012).

Central to research on student learning in WIL is a dual foci on transferring acquired, formal knowledge into practice, and measuring competency. This is typically demonstrated in WIL publications that employ survey instruments (Freudenberg, Brimble & Cameron, 2011; Cord, Bowrey & Clements, 2010), or that examine assessable, formal learning such as analysis of students' reflective reports (Clinton & Thomas, 2011; Cord et al., 2010). This research, focussed on 'harnessing' or drawing out individually acquired knowledge (Fenwick, 2010), rests on what Beckett and Hager (2002) call the *standard paradigm of learning*. In the standard paradigm (SPL), knowledge is de-contextualised and transferable, and is considered separate to action (Beckett & Hager, 2002). This SPL may limit investigations into informal learning, because of the difficulties in capturing learning that is implicit and unstructured (Eraut, 2004) and that occurs in the messy, everyday activities of the workplace (Beckett & Hager, 200; Marsick & Watkins, 1990). It also suggests that WIL dichotomies, of theory/practice, university/professions and thought/action, may hinder the development of students, by focusing on binary differences rather than the emergence of knowledge and skills (Dimenas, 2010). How then, can we examine areas of informal learning that have gone overlooked? Is there a way of examining learning that contests dichotomies and celebrates the richness of messy conditions of everyday practice?

An alternative, practice-based approach offered by Beckett and Hager (2002) and taken up by Fenwick (2009, 2010; Fenwick, Edwards & Sawchuk, 2011) suggests new ways of understanding learning and knowing as inseparable from action. In the last two decades a practice-based approach has received increasing interest in organisational studies (Gherardi, 2009), sociology and technology studies, and critical management studies (Fenwick, 2010). Scholars have investigated theoretical implications and practical consequences of understanding organizational knowing as situated in practices of action in ways that are relational, provisional and socio-material (Nicolini,

Gherardi & Yanow, 2003; Orlikowski, 2010). A practice-based approach shifts the focus from individual acquisition (Hager 2004; Fenwick, 2010), towards practice as the loci of organizing (Gherardi, 2009). The purpose of this paper is to take up a practice-based approach to investigate the 'learning-in-action' of WIL students. This paper first, problematises the SPL and offers an alternative practice-based approach including Fenwick's (2009, 2011) framework for socio-materiality. This framework is subsequently presented through three vignettes of WIL student's informal learning.

**Limitations of the Standard Paradigm of Learning**

Mainstream educational thought has overtime developed into the SPL (Beckett and Hager 2002). In this view learning is dualistic (Dimenas, 2010), separating the mind as the 'storage container' of knowledge and the body its channel for transference (Dohn, 2011). SPL casts learners as isolated, individual minds, privileges mental learning activities and events, and, offers learning as transparent, and transferable (Beckett & Hagar, 2002). In the formal learning curriculum, the SPL influences how knowledge is understood and used. Courses are used to transmit knowledge that can be used to solve problems in daily work practice. Schön (1983, 1987) draws attention to this particular conception of knowledge, naming it *technical rationality* to characterize the view that practitioners have a bank of theories from which they draw to analyse and solve various work problems. Based on this view, the formal curriculum teaches students de-contextualised knowledge in classrooms for later *use* in the workplace.

Critiques by scholars demonstrate the shortcomings of SPL with everyday practice (Beckett & Hager, 2002; Dohn, 2011; Schon, 1983, 1987). SPL delivers to the 'Cartesian learner', an isolated, individual mind, that is rational, unchanging and who acts as a spectator in the world (Beckett & Hagar, 2002, p.95). The notion of the 'Cartesian learner' is perpetuated in studies that privilege learning as something that occurs only in the mind of individuals. Such approaches are however problematic as they do not take into account learning and knowing that is enacted or embodied (Gherardi, 2009). For example, how do students learn about socio-material norms such as dress, office spaces, communication technologies, etc? Or how do students know what to do in spontaneous, uncertain situations without cognitive forethought or planning?

We suggest the lack attention to informal learning in WIL is at least in part due to the limitations of what has been the dominant educational paradigm (Beckett & Hagar, 2002). Dohn (2011) points out, that in an educational context, traditional dualisms are still influential because "alternative ways of acting that challenge and change the practice logic *from within the practices* have not been

developed yet" (Dohn, 2011, p.680). Understanding informal learning may therefore have gone unnoticed due to a lack of awareness of the richness of mundane practices and unquestioned dominance of SPL (Hagar & Halliday, 2009). The practice-based approach addresses some shortcomings of SPL by highlighting materiality (i.e. dress, technology, office artefacts), spatio-temporal aspects (i.e. where they are sitting, what can be heard) and embodied practices (i.e. performed roles).

*Practice, knowing and learning*

Organizational theorists have described practice as the performative, situational, and social understanding of everyday work activities (Gherardi, 2001; Nicolini, 2009; Orlikowski, 2002; Schatzki, 2002). Practice, learning and knowing are mutually constituted, in embodied performances, situated in space and time, in a complex web of relationships among people, material artefacts and activities (Gherardi, 2001, 2009). Practice-based theorists unite in their repudiation of Cartesian dualisms and a cognitive focus of knowledge (Schatzki, 2002). For these theorists, knowledge is performed and is 'at any given time, what the practice has made it' (Taylor, 1993, pp.57). While practice-based theorists may be rooted in different and contested ontological positions (Fenwick, 2010), we take up a relational ontology and performative epistemology, to explain the inseparability of the social and material, knowledge and action. A relational ontology emphasizes the constitution and reconstitution of humans and non-humans, in their connectedness and entwined histories (Haraway, 2008) that is how "everything that is has no existence apart from its relation to other things" (Langley & Tsoukas, 2010, p.3). A performative epistemology shifts the focus away from 'knowledge about things' to 'performance of practices' (Barad, 2003) and places an emphasis on knowing as a practice, in other words, knowledge is performed, and not 'stored in minds' (Orlikowski, 2002).

A relational, performative approach underpins this practice-based perspective, as the mutual enactment of practice and knowing. Such an ontological and epistemological aproach is important for the current discussion, to move the focus of learning from the minds of students (SPL) to learning in socio-material practices. The practice-based approach also offers an alternative to the prevailing standard paradigm, which may open doors to new ways of research and new findings. A practice-based approach also fits well with WIL by attending to the everyday, workplace conditions of WIL practices and offering a theoretical frame in contrast to SPL that recognises the emergent, ambiguous boundaries of socio-materiality in practice.

**The importance of socio-materiality in learning**

A socio-material perspective recognises that human and non-human entities are inseparability interconnected in practice (Orlikowski, 2007). Performance of socio-material practices constitute an entanglement of the social, material and affective relations located in everyday action (Sykes, Keevers & Treleavan, 2011). Exploring socio-materiality in educational contexts, Fenwick and colleagues (2009; Fenwick et al., 2011) offer a way of highlighting socio-material practices to help configure professional knowledge, subjects and activities. In this view, the material does not pre-exist, rather it becomes configured in boundary making practices (Fenwick, 2009). Here practice is the enactment of learning, because "humans and what they take to be their learning and social processes do not float, distinct, in container-like contexts of education, such as classrooms or community sites" (Fenwick et al, 2011, p. 2). Materials invite, exclude and regulate practices (Fenwick et al., 2011). Thus this research offers three core socio-material propositions to "[call] attention to the importance of materiality in education and learning" (Fenwick et al., 2011, p.1). These socio-material propositions are;

1. Highlight the invisible educational activities in material contexts

This view brings materiality in education front and centre (Fenwick et al., 2011). Education is the "intentional activity to promote learning for particular purposes in any situation: classrooms, work sites, virtual spaces, mentoring meetings, community projects, social movements, and so forth" (Fenwick et al, 2011, p.1). In all these enactments, education is centrally material – "its energies, processes, motives, and outcomes are fully entangled with material practice, nature, time, space, technologies and objects of all kinds" (Fenwick et al, 2011, p.1). These 'material entanglements' go unacknowledged in the conventional educational preoccupations.

2. Making the mundane visible

By calling attention to the socio-material, the mundane and often invisible aspects of everyday life, are brought into focus (Fenwick et al., 2011; Sykes, Keevers & Treleavan, 2011). Socio-material studies attempt to expose detail and make connections through the enactment of practices that may be taken for granted. These sites cannot be "conceptualized and dismissed as simply a wash of material stuff and spaces" (Fenwick et al, 2011, p. 2). Instead a socio-material approach claims that "things that assemble these contexts, and incidentally the actions and bodies including human ones that are part of these assemblages, are continuously acting upon each other to bring forth and distribute as well as obscure and deny knowledge" (Fenwick et al, 2011, p. 2). In this way objects are messy and indeterminate, not fixed and neatly categorized becoming what they are through inclusion in practices (Barad, 2003).

3. The materialisation of socio-material categories

Socio-materiality problematises the taken-for-granted conventions in educational analysis by offering an alternative approach that posits socio-materiality as constitutive of everyday life (Barad 2003). Socio-materiality brings into question the assumptions on which categories are materialised and continuously enacted (Fenwick et al. 2011). Such categories include; the problematic binaries of theory/practice, knower/known, subject/object, doing/reflecting and formal/informal learning; and, those things that are commonly used to think about, plan and act in education: teacher, student, policy, curriculum, assessment and achievement (Fenwick et al. 2011). The problem with these categories is that they suggest knowledge is distinct and separate from within the actions from which it is enacted. For example, taken into WIL context, this view may challenge the extent to which an 'intern' is also an 'employee' or 'undergraduate', and offer instead fluidity of boundaries, as continuously re-enacted, overlapping and emergent.

The utility and explanatory power of practice-based approaches invite researchers to "illuminate important material dynamics that are too often neglected or underestimated in educational research" to demonstrate how "*matter* matters in the practices of becoming and knowing that constitute the spheres of education and learning" (Fenwick et al., 2011, p. 5). While the SPL elevates cognitive approaches over the corporeal and material, a socio-materiality approach suggests these are "*equivalent* in importance to human elements in educational transactions" (Fenwick, et al., 2011, p.2). A socio-material approach encourages academics to "open dialogue among theoretical conceptions that reclaim and re-think material practice – how *matter* comes to matter in the social and personal mix" (Fenwick et al, 2011, p. 2). It is in this spirit that Barad wrote; "Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. But there is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter" (Barad, 2003, p.801). The following section therefore aims to "illuminate important material dynamics" (Fenwick et al, 2011, p. 5) to examine informal learning in WIL practices.

**WIL socio-material vignettes**

The study presented here forms part of the preliminary investigations of a doctoral research project. An ethnographic study is presented of three commerce interns on WIL placement. Students were participants in the Commerce Internship Program at the University of Wollongong, on the South Coast of New South Wales, Australia. This program is a third year internship subject that comprises sixteen days on placement in a local organisation, including lectures and assessments, over a

thirteen week semester. The researcher was made known to participants, ensuring ethical treatment of interpretive, ethnographic data gathering.

This study employs an interpretive ethnographic methodology (Miettinen, Samra-Fredericks, & Yanow, 2009; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006; Ybema et al., 2009). Ethnographic methods highlight the intricacies of everyday life "not through questionnaires developed and analysed while sitting in an office, but by going out into the organizational 'field' – shadowing managers, joining street cops on motorbikes, attending (un)eventful meetings, working as a midwife's assistant, and so forth" (Ybema at el., 2009, p. 1). Just as informal learning in WIL has been largely unrecognised, the very ordinary aspects of organisational life are often overlooked. Ethnographic methods draw out these aspects by attending to the "extraordinary in the mundane, day-to-day aspects of organizing" which can lead to a "fuller, more grounded, practice-based understanding of organizational life" (Ybema et al., 2009, p.2). Ethnography usefully aligns with practice-theory's interest in illuminating the mundane, spontaneous and everyday nature of social practices.

This study combined several methods to achieve triangulation in 'gathering' data (Schwartz-Shea, 2006). These methods included participant-observation, unstructured, open interviews with interns and supervisors, photographs, taken by the researcher and participants, and the collection of WIL artefacts, such as assessments, and workplace artefacts, such as task-lists. The researcher's field notes and reflections were also a source of data (Schwartz-Shea, 2006) by conveying a sense of 'being there' (Miettinen et al., 2009). In order to demonstrate the ideas discussed, we present three vignettes of informal learning. These vignettes "help to ground and illustrate how we may begin to examine the constitutive entanglement characterizing sociomaterial practices" (Orlikoswki, 2007, p. 1439). The vignettes draw on three student interns investigated; Josie in human resources, Dalia in marketing and Steve in finance.

*Highlighting invisible activities: Knowing in doing*
Josie[i] is a third year human recourses student, completing her internship at a multi-national hotel. In the HR department the chain of command begins with the HR Manager, then the HR Coordinator, Jessica and the part-time Personal Assistant to the General Manager, all of whom may delegate tasks to interns and work experience students from the local university, college and high schools. Josie begins her internship shadowing Jessica and performing administrative tasks; for example, data entry, filing and organising the mail. She accompanies Jessica into interviews and follows her as she orients new work experience students into the organisation. Four days into Josie's internship, Jessica resigns. In the interim of finding a replacement, Josie takes on the full duties of the HR

Coordinator. A close analysis of Josie's practices in evolving, emergent socio-material arrangements reveals how she learns in WIL.

Josie, seated at the HR Coordinator desk, makes and receives phone calls, sends and responds to email, and reacts to a stream of employees and managers with enquiries or tasks. The contact number and email is designated to the HR Coordinator role rather than the employee, so with the hand-over of passwords and duties, Josie slips into these professional practices. Josie's practices now comprise arranging and attending interviews, and, organising and conducting pre-placement meetings and first-day orientations for work experience students and new employees. In the absence of other management personnel, work experience students will turn to Josie for tasks, approval and advice. Josie is now charged with supervisory practices such as devising and delegating activities. How did Josie, as a newly placed intern, know what to do? And, what did she learn from this? Josie reflects in an interview:

> That's a good question, I don't know. I just, I don't know, I tried to, with Sandy I sort of observed what Jessica had done with work experience students previously when she was there. So we get a lot of business admin, sort of TAFE students coming in, um, and they put them down in HR so that they can do some filing 'n some typing 'n some data entry 'n opening the mail 'n things like that. So I guess I just sort of told Sandy to do what I had seen Jessica tell the other work experience student to do.
>
> (Josie, Interview, p. 10)

Josie did not receive training or scaffolding for supervisory activities and her first response displayed limited cognitive awareness of supervisory knowledge, expressed as 'I don't know'. Despite a lack of procedural training, Josie's enactment of supervisory practices suggested she did know what to do, but not explicitly- she knew more than she could tell. The knowledge of how to supervise lies within the *performance* of supervision practices. As Josie began to unpack how she knew what do to, she drew on her observation of Jessica's practices, that is, in relation to others. This performance is seen as *relational*, in that her knowledge was enacted *in relation* to other supervisory practices. Learning is grounded in a performative, relational approach that precedes cognitive awareness (Barad, 2003; Haraway, 2008). In contract to SPL that privileges cognitive awareness and explicit articulation of propositional knowledge, Josie would struggle to reveal such knowledge learnt in WIL practices. Here we can see how *enactment* exceeds the SPL (Becket and Hagar, 2002).

*Making the mundane visible: Communicating in silence*

Dalia is a third year marketing and communications student completing her internship at a not-for-profit sporting club in a southern Sydney suburb. This club has only one employee, the General Manager, Greg. At Dalia's orientation, Greg reinforces her usefulness to the company as the 'marketing expert'. Greg's office is attached to the club's main area, which comprises long, seated dining tables aligned along the window facing the sporting fields. During the placement days, Dalia sits in the open dining area on a table closest to Greg's office. Although they are physically close, less than two metres, the wall to Greg's office divides them. Greg is busy with club and board members, players and contract workers (such as electricians) coming and going. In addition, he has his mobile and the landline ringing throughout the day. Dalia is quiet and shy, and besides the chatter between Greg and visitors, the large open room is often silent.

Dalia is working on a press release and poster for a club event. She has her personal laptop set up and a club email address organised by Greg, to communicate with sponsors and advertising agents. Greg delegates tasks first thing in the morning. He calls this delegation 'instructional work', that is, he gives the instructions to Dalia, the 'marketing expert' and she completes them. When Dalia is not in the office, she often emails Greg with questions and updates regarding a marketing plan she has been reviewing for him. This mode of communication extends into office hours also. For example, on one particularly quiet day, Greg appears suddenly and says to Dalia: "Na, only James has those backgrounds" (Dalia, Field Notes, p.6), breaking what has been almost two hours of silence in his office. Although in the same overall space and only meters between them, Dalia uses email to communicate with her supervisor. Such an instance is part of a pattern of normative communication practices through technology. How does this communication practice shape learning practices?

The performance of emailing shapes how, where and when the intern and supervisor interact. It seems the use of email as a communication practice between intern and supervisor demonstrates the "constitutive entanglement of the social and the material in everyday organizational life" (Orlikowski, 2007, p. 1438). This makes the socio-material practice of emailing, central to practices of learning in this internship. Email shapes how, where and when Greg responds to Dalia's questions. In turn, Dalia learns through engaging in this communication practice by developing communication norms. However the practice may also constrain potential informal learning (Fenwick et al., 2011) for example through limited interpersonal contact.

By drawing attention to this communication practice, the boundaries of workplace supervision can also be redefined, the expectations of availability altered and the importance of socio-materiality highlighted to better understand supervision practices and informal learning. By illuminating the

invisible aspects of WIL socio-material practices, new understandings of supervision practices and how an intern learns in WIL are brought to the surface. Reflecting back to a SPL approach, it is suggested that the SPL would be restricted in revealing how materiality is central to everyday practices (Orlikowski, 2007).

*Socio-material categories: Performing multiple roles*

Steve is a third year finance student completing an internship at the same hotel as Josie. As well as his internship, Steve, like many interns, performs multiple roles in his personal and student life. In a practice-based approach, these roles are enacted and the boundaries are blurry and emerge when performed in sociomaterial practices (Fenwick et al., 2011). What can a socio-material approach to understanding roles tell us about Steve's knowing and learning?

Despite his discipline area, learning for Steve highlights the mundane and everyday conditions of WIL practice. In Steve's case, he points to his clothing changes, to explain his multiple commitments during the week. He outlines a typical week;

> Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday I go to work [internship]- you wear formals. Come back home, I have second change of tops, change into casuals for uni, I work [study] at the uni, come back home by 10pm. Next day again, go to work [study] same thing and come back at 5pm, casual whole day. Friday, Fridays are my [casual work], so I have to wear my [casual work] uniform.
>
> (Steve, Interview, p. 100)

Following Steve's change of clothes highlights his learning multiple roles and the learning of material arrangements that shape the performance of each role. His clear description of clothing changes for the performance of each role, suggests learning how to management movements between roles. He lacks distinction of the term 'work', instead he highlights the role by distinguishing his clothes: Monday to Wednesday *work* is formal, while Thursday *work* is casual. For Steve, this distinction of clothing outlines the performance of each role, with the first being internship and the later being study at the university. His description shows how knowledge of each role is not a cognitive shift between roles, but that knowledge is in the performance of the role. In recognising his multiple 'costume changes', Steve refers to himself as a 'superhero' (Steve, Interview, p. 100). He uses this metaphor, not to outline any power or masquerading, but to help describe that one person *performs* multiple activities. In this way, knowledge is not distinct and separate from the actions from which it is developed (Fenwick et al. 2011).

**Discussion & Conclusion**

10

Mainstream approaches that characterise student learning as an individual, cognitive acquisition of knowledge continue to have prominence in WIL publications. According to Beckett and Hager (2002) this SPL is problematic as it discounts learning and knowing that is enacted or embodied and ignores important learning that occurs in the messy, complex, everyday complexities of work. Understandings of WIL informal learning have the potential to be fruitfully enriched by employing a practice-based approach as discussed. This paper offers a way of exploring overlooked aspects of learning at work focussing on the socio-material, performative and relational. Fenwick et al.'s (2011) framework therefore is a useful way of presenting how socio-materiality invites, regulates and constrains informal learning. Through three vignettes, this paper has demonstrated how a practice-based approach offers a window into WIL practices that may uncover new understandings of informal learning in WIL that may be otherwise overlooked. By shedding light on this approach, WIL administrators and those interested in WIL, are exposed to an alternative approach to consider when next researching knowing and learning in WIL.

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[i] All names in this paper are pseudonyms.