Practices for Learning in Early Careers

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Abstract:	Against a backdrop of competitive labour markets, employers have questioned business schools' ability to prepare fresh graduates to 'hit the ground running'. This empirical study explores the research question, "How do fresh graduates prepare themselves for the early stages of their careers through the use of learning practices?" The findings show a gap between students' espoused and enacted learning practices, as graduates transition from the scaffolds of university learning to an autonomous practice-based way of learning. Espoused learning practices engage a top-down causal approach involving goal-setting and identifying resources, while enacted learning practices involves a bottom-up effectuation process that is about discovery, improvisation and reflexivity. For the first contribution, I offer a more nuanced view of learning practices in the form of practices for learning that is about 'doing to learn'. The second provides insight from the coalescence between sociomateriality and self-directed learning to shape bespoke practices for learning in support of early-career success. Third, I offer more granularity to the notion of learning careers. I argue that distinctive practices for learning that emerge over time helps with overcoming challenges associated with important episodes in graduates' careers, such as in their early careers and career change.

PRACTICES FOR LEARNING IN EARLY CAREERS

INTRODUCTION

In a dynamic world characterised by tenuous employment relationships, individuals are expected to be autonomous in their learning and in shaping their careers. With increasing social acknowledgement and acceptance of this new reality, business schools should be leading the way in preparing their students for their early careers. Or are they? The practical need for this study is clear; only by gaining insight to the challenges that graduates face in their quest to attain their first graduate role and how they deal with these challenges can business schools be informed in the way they prepare their students.

Many business schools are, of course, trying to address these challenges (Friga, Bettis, & Sullivan, 2003) by embedding practice-based learning curriculum into their programmes such as placements and internships (Narayanan, Olk, & Fukami, 2010). While all these contribute to students learning 'practically', they do not directly address the issue of how students and graduate prepare themselves to be autonomous learners outside the university. The scaffold provided by business schools, while expected and at times necessary, has unintended consequences in limiting independent learning, especially in undergraduates (Ozlem, 2019).

Such a gap is widely discussed in literature over and again, but yet it does not seem to be resolved, e.g. Kennedy, Billett, Gherardi, and Grealish (2015). To address this issue, business schools need to understand how well they have prepared their students to be autonomous learners. Exploring students' espoused learning practices, as a start, allows us to understand how business schools have taught their students to prepare for their early careers. However, this must be followed by investigating these graduates' actual experiences, i.e. their enacted learning practices, because only then can we gain insight into what graduates had to 'do' and how they make the best out of their social and material situations. Further, using

participants from the same cohort will enable some meaningful comparison between the 'espoused' and the 'enacted'.

This study uses the practice turn in management education as a theoretical background in providing an understanding of the nature of practice and how it is relevant to learning within the context of business schools (Corradi, Gherardi, & Verzelloni, 2010). In the foreground, sociomateriality (Leonardi, 2013; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008) and self-directed learning (Lounsbury, Levy, Park, Gibson, & Smith, 2009) are used as lenses to gain insight into what graduates actually 'do', as they navigate their unique situational factors in their early careers. The research then employs the concept of learning careers (Goodlad, 2007) to situate graduates' early careers as an archetypal 'episode' to show how learning practices can be pivotal throughout one's careers. This theoretical frame is utilised in responding to the research question, *"How do fresh graduates establish and engage in learning practices in the early stages of their practitioner careers?"*.

In addressing the research question, data were collected over three phases using a mixed-method approach drawn from students' reflective accounts and interviews with the participants who had obtained their first early-career jobs. The findings show a divergence between espoused and enacted learning practices. At the end of Phase 1 and 2, the research showed that students' 'espoused learning practices' involved a top-down, deliberately planned approach through identifying predetermined 'learning goals', followed by the identification of 'learning resources' to enable the attainment of these goals.

In contrast, data from Phase 3 involving graduates who had obtained their first job, revealed what they actually did in using a bottom-up effectuation (emergent and opportunistic) approach (Sarasvathy, 2008) to inform their 'enacted learning practices'. Enacted learning practices involved two categories. First, 'learning activities' – engaging in a process of discovery that involved graduates settling into a routine by identifying learning

opportunities that fit into their social and material situations. Second, graduates also had to 'learn reflexively' in dealing with unexpected micro disruptions in their daily routines. Through improvisation, graduates learn to be reflexive and learn from being reflexive.

The findings lead to three distinct contributions. First, I offer 'practices for learning' as a more nuanced view of learning practices. The second contribution provides insight from the coalescence between sociomateriality and self-directed learning that shapes bespoke practices for learning in support of early-career success. Third, I offer more granularity to the notion of learning careers. I argue that distinctive practices for learning emerge over time that helps individuals to overcome challenges associated with important episodes in their careers, such as their early careers and mid-career changes.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. In the next section, I discuss the theoretical background used to underpin the research question and to frame the discussions and contributions. The methods section follows as I outline how the data were collected and analysed, including a presentation of the data structure. In the findings section, I expand on the two main thematic categories and their respective dimensions. Next, I discuss the implications of the findings on theory and practice, and the main contributions of the study. Finally, I outline the limitations of the study and potential future research, followed by concluding remarks.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Business Schools and Graduates' Early Careers

Many business schools have experienced steady growth as they fill the market with innovative programmes (Friga et al., 2003). However, while the ability of business schools to develop effective managers has held much promise, and despite growth in student numbers, there has been a long-standing question of if and how well business schools have actually met

expectations in preparing students for the 'real world' (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). Mintzberg (2004) provides insight into the nature of the problem highlighted by Pfeffer and Fong (2002), as he argued that management education provided by business schools is inadequate as it mainly focuses on only one of the three poles of management that is science (i.e. logic and analysis), while fundamentally overlooking the art (i.e. imagination and vision) and craft (i.e. experiential and the visceral) of management. Mintzberg contends that management is a practice and, unlike a profession, cannot be decontextualised as he extols the merits of practice in management learning and development. Similarly, Edelman, Manolova, and Brush (2008) found significant discrepancies between teaching content and real-world practice knowledge. Indeed, Chia and Holt (2008) argue that business schools' overemphasis on knowledge-by-representation (e.g. models and frameworks) needs to be counterbalanced by instilling knowledge-by-exemplification, which is demonstrative and performative, in the curriculum.

In addition, while Raelin (2007) has recognised the efforts of business schools to synthesise theory and practise through practice-based methods and programmes, he argues that business schools have undone their own efforts. Business schools are complicit in exacerbating the problem as they continue to spoon-feed, which undermines the aim and counteract the benefits of practice-based learning, especially in the context of undergraduates (Raelin, 2009). The issue is not just about management knowledge and abilities. An equally important matter is also about developing independent and reflective learners who can skilfully navigate their learning in facing a dynamic and challenging world (Crick, Haigney, Huang, Coburn, & Goldspink, 2013).

To develop effective managers, business schools first need to develop graduates who are effective learners, who can prepare for their own learning for fast-changing environments and 'self-renew' in the context of changing careers (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2019). However,

this remains a challenge. Evidence of a transitionary gap is underscored by Kennedy et al. (2015) who maintain that graduates find themselves jostling between different learning cultures in universities and the workplace.

Nonetheless, extant research has shown some redress of the situation involving the gap between academia and practice. For instance, Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) found that business schools play a role beyond developing students' management knowledge and action, specifically in enhancing their sense and understanding of their own identity through the cultivation of sentient communities. In addition, Ungureanu and Bertolotti (2018) use the notion of boundary work to show how academic and student practitioners try to breach boundaries to learn and enhance their understanding of each other's practices. However, these studies involved experienced practitioners returning to higher education, which leaves the unanswered question regarding the nature of the transitionary gap in the way fresh graduates assimilate and prepare for the early stages of their careers. Beyond graduates' early careers, business schools also have a responsibility to cultivate behaviours and practices that will sustain graduates throughout their careers.

Learning Careers

Literature on careers in the management field generally agree that the term 'career' usually denotes the progressive development of an individual over their working life (Baruch, 2004). 'Careers' can involve employment in a particular profession or sector, as a 'portfolio' of jobs, and entrepreneurial initiatives (Bright & Pryor, 2011). Over the years, scholars, e.g. Super (1992), Levinson (1996), and Sullivan (1999), found an increasing emphasis in adaptability and self-direction in career-related research. An example is professional contractors who are not just skilled in their vocations but are also proficient operators in the labour market (Barley & Kunda, 2011).

However, adult education literature adopts a broader perspective in the form of learning careers as it views careers as a nebulous entity that relates to an individual's entire life journey (Yang & Chau, 2016). The notion of 'learning careers' views learning as a vocation in itself (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000) where a career, according to Goffman (1968), refers to "*any social strand of any person's course through life*" (p. 119). Learning is ubiquitous, and how we learn in and for our careers is influenced by culture and society (Schatzki, 2001). Our learning also continuously evolves as we may recalibrate our sensemaking and re-evaluate taken-for-granted assumptions as we and our careers grow (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000).

Indeed, research into learning careers indicates that the 'school of hard knocks' plays a vital role in the way individuals learn (Crossan, Field, Gallacher, & Merrill, 2003). Viewing careers from a learning perspective enables scholars to appreciate the challenges of careers that can be constant and/or in a flux (Crossan et al., 2003), which inevitably varies across individuals, time and situations. This view is especially relevant with the growing trend of individuals having multiple careers throughout their life. Billett, Smith, and Barker (2005) argue that the notion of learning careers means that individuals can see themselves as an 'enterprising self', who are able to change and transform their employability niche depending on the trajectory of their personal life. This argument suggests that individuals' learning practices are becoming increasingly important in preparing and developing themselves at critical junctures of their working life, such as when changing careers or growing a portfolio career (Engestrom & Sannino, 2016; Scaratti, Ivaldi, & Frassy, 2017).

The Practice Turn

To understand how learning practices are constituted in relation to learning careers, I focus on two themes emerging from the practice turn. First, reflection and reflexivity providing a

person-centred and activity-oriented view of engagement in practices and second, sociomateriality as a balancing context-focused view.

Reflection and Reflexivity

Building on the seminal work of Argyris, e.g. 1988, 1991, and Schön, e.g. 1983, 1987, contemporary scholars have advanced our understanding on how learning and practice come together to enhance the development of practitioners. Learning is often proposed to; inform practice (Lindberg & Rantatalo, 2015) and be a result of practice (Raelin, 2007). However, scholars argue that the relationship between practice and learning is more intimate and even inseparable (Feldman & Worline, 2016; Lave, 1993) as a mutually constituted duality (Hibbert, Siedlok, & Beech, 2016; Nicolini & Monteiro, 2016). For example, Lave and Wenger (1991) see "*learning is itself an improvised practice*" (p. 93). Learning practices, a term that reflects the close relationship between learning and practice, refer to two established forms; practice-based learning (also known as work-based learning), i.e. *learning by doing* (Feldman & Worline, 2016), and the practice-based standpoint, i.e. *learning in doing* (J. S. Brown & Duguid, 1991). Practice-based learning concerns how learning typically takes place in organisations for skill-development (Tempest & Starkey, 2004). The practice-based standpoint, in contrast, is the study of noncanonical practices that focuses on the situated-view of learning in influencing the practice of a community (Corradi et al., 2010).

Learning and practice are closely linked to individuals' ability to be reflective and reflexive. Reflection is the process of learning from our sensemaking of the world around us (Schön, 1983). The contemplative nature of reflection is associated with the development of mindfulness (Keevers & Treleaven, 2011) and cognitive skills, e.g. critical thinking (Loon & Bell, 2018). However, Cunliffe (2009b) argues that while the notion of reflection is appealing, it nonetheless assumes objectivity, i.e. knower, a known and presumption of rationality, which is not how the real world is in practice.

What is needed, in addition, is reflexivity (Cunliffe & Easterby-Smith, 2017; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015; Savickas, 2016) as Easterby-Smith and Malina (1999) argue, "*reflexivity is more than merely reflecting on what has taken place: it involves actively considering the implications of what has been observed for the observer's own practice."* (p. 77). Cunliffe (2004) maintain that reflexivity is vital because our interaction (through habits, routines and immediate responses) with the world is reflexive, which is underpinned by our assumptions and values. Reflexivity is also pivotal in addressing dissonance, in particular when things do not go according to plan (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). Therefore, reflection and reflexivity play a fundamental role in how we see the world, how we learn and shape our social realities through practice, and in turn, what we learn from our constitutive realities and how it shapes us (Cunliffe, 2009a). The role of reflection and reflexivity can provide new insights that build upon our current understanding of learning practices and therefore warrants further exploration. Nonetheless, learning practices are afforded and constrained by their sociomaterial contexts (Orlikowski, 2009).

Sociomateriality and Self-Directed Learning

The sociomateriality lens provides a richer understanding and nuanced view of graduates' learning practices. Sociomateriality refers to the interaction between humans, and with non-humans, and the use and arrangement of artefacts (Balogun, Jacobs, Jarzabkowski, Mantere, & Vaara, 2014). Orlikowski (2007) argues that all materiality is created through a social process, and the social context gives meaning to materiality, its interpretation and use.

The social perspective is essential to understand graduates' learning practices especially given fresh graduates are likely to rely upon their family, social and university networks for support (Feldman & Worline, 2016) due to their limited (e.g. financial) resources and the fact that they have yet to build strong professional and practical credentials. In addition to the social, the materiality of technology is likely to play a meaningful, if not a taken-for-granted,

role in the lives of the 'digital natives' (Balogun et al., 2014; Lovelace, Eggers, & Dyck, 2016). Sociomateriality is therefore central in shaping the production of situated knowledge by graduates in preparing for their early careers, and emergent practice is thus acutely connected to contextual elements (Gherardi, 2016; Orlikowski, 2007). As fresh graduates prepare for their early careers, a process of imbrication (overlapping or layering) that brings the social and material together in their practice may occur (Leonardi, 2012), although some scholars e.g. Gherardi (2016) suggest that such a process may be more complex. Nonetheless, the material context is inanimate and requires human agency to mobilise its potential influence (Leonardi, 2013). For instance, some technologies can be used as a learning, productivity or social tools depending on the need, aims and degree of expertise of the user (Leonardi, 2012).

Thus self-directed learning, mainly viewed from a motivational perspective (Lounsbury et al., 2009; Lounsbury, Saudargas, Gibson, & Leong, 2005), is also an essential adjunct to understanding sociomaterial influences on new graduates. Fresh graduates need to be intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to engage with their sociomaterial world in particular ways – which open them up to particular influences – as they persevere in finding their first early-career role (Bonk, Lee, Kou, Xu, & Sheu, 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Integrative focus

In summary, there are doubts about business schools' ability to develop graduates' learning practices that will support their success in their early careers and beyond. To address this problem, this study's theoretical frame adopts the perspective of the practice turn in management education. Specifically, I explore the role of reflection and reflexivity in graduates' learning practices in navigating their unique sociomaterial environments in their initial learning careers. This theoretical frame guides the answer to the research question,

"How do fresh graduates establish and engage in learning practices in the early stages of their practitioner careers?".

METHOD

Research Setting and Ethics

Data was collected over three phases spanning over 18 months from undergraduates' reflective accounts (208 reflective accounts in Phase 1) and interviews with them (64 interviews in Phase 2 and 28 interviews in Phase 3). Specifically, the research was conducted using a final year mandatory 20-credit change management undergraduate module led by me. Taught over 12 weeks to 214 registered students, the final four weeks of the module focused on employability as it covered the role of the entrepreneurs, the rise of self-employed workers in organisations, and the growing trend of people changing careers. At the end of the module, each student completed a 1,000-word reflective account on how they would go about obtaining their first graduate role.

As part of the ethics approval process, permission was requested from students to use their reflective accounts. Information sheets and consent forms were provided to the students in the class. I explained the research, its aim, what was requested from the students and what it then entailed. Students were reassured in the information sheet and by the tutors that there were no implications on their class grades whether they chose to participate or not. To protect the students, a university administrator, who was not involved in the module nor the research, was named as the contact point for the students and to whom the consent forms were submitted. As part of Phase 1, students were informed that if they accepted the interview invitation, they would have to bring along their original reflective accounts, thereby losing their anonymity to the researcher (but not in the reporting of the results). The ethics

information sheet explained that this was necessary to allow the researchers to link the data collected from the reflective accounts and the subsequent Phase 2 interviews.

Data Collection and Limitations

In Phase 1, a total of 208 students provided consent to use their reflective accounts. The large volume of consent (97.1%) shows that self-selection bias is unlikely to be an issue. Students' written reflections are an appropriate data source because it enables them to express their candid but considered sensemaking of the world around them and have "interpretive validity" (Maxwell, 1992). Wright, Irving, Hibbert, and Greenfield (2018) argue that the variation in the depth of reflection is a helpful indicator of differences in students' musings of their learning practices. A limitation of such written reflections is the perfunctory use of concepts that students may have come across in the module and other areas in their university education. To minimise such response bias, students were given classes on reflective writing specifically on why reflecting was necessary for professional (and personal) development, when reflecting could be most helpful (e.g. surmounting challenges, to learn), what reflection 'looks like' (various examples of reflective accounts were shown) and how reflection could be undertaken - therefore emphasising that their reflective account should be bespoke.

Sixty-four students volunteered for Phase 2, and the interviews were used to clarify and gain further insight from Phase 1. I asked each of the 64 interviewees if I could contact and invite them for another interview about six months later. Within six months of graduation, Phase 3 was initiated, and 28 graduates responded. To reduce social desirability bias, I stressed that the research was interested in what worked and what did not. I also emphasised that significant learning usually results from failures (as well as success), and people tend to feel the need to change the way they behave and think when they realise things

'do not work' (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). Table 1 presents an overview of the data collected.

Insert Table 1 about here

Data Analysis

The data analyses follow well-established procedures for inductively building theories from qualitative data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) informed by other guidelines for coding of interview data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013) and for working with student reflection data (Wright et al., 2018). The data set was split two-ways. Phase 1 reflective accounts with Phase 2 interviews (I used findings from Phase 2 to validate findings from Phase 1), and Phase 3 interviews on its own. In each phase, open coding was undertaken in NVivo 11, followed by axial coding to identify the theoretical aggregates. I then compared the data sets to gain insight from a temporal perspective of students' journey from pre-graduation to obtaining their first post-graduate roles. Figure 1 shows the data analysis process, specifying how the data was collected and analysed.

Insert Figure 1 about here

In the first phase, as expected, there was a significant variation in the depth of the 208 the reflective accounts as they ranged between highly descriptive to highly introspective. Nonetheless, they were all were deemed usable. Given that the reflective account was based on what students would do to learn to be successful in landing their first graduate jobs, the initial coding mainly revealed three dimensions; focus, approach and suitability. From the axial coding, two theoretical aggregates emerged; ‘learning goals’ and ‘learning resources’.

Audio recording from the Phase 2 interviews was transcribed into text, and open coding was undertaken. The Phase 2 interviews did not just allow me to validate findings from Phase 1, but it also enabled me to gain insight and more fine-grained understanding of the dimensions by drawing narrative threads from the 64 participants. The participants' espoused practice conveyed 'what' was their blueprint for obtaining their first job, and 'why'. Figure 2 illustrates the data structure.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Conversely, the Phase 3 interviews captured details of their enacted practice, i.e. 'how', and showed more of the challenges and tensions that the graduates faced (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Phase 3 was intended to explore graduates' learning practices and how they did things differently in reality. The interview questions were open-ended, and participants were asked, 'how did you about preparing to get your first graduate role', 'what did you do and why', 'whom did you rely on' and 'what did you use (tools)'. The initial coding revealed three dimensions; discover, operate and evaluate. From the axial coding, two theoretical aggregates emerged; 'learning activities' and 'learning reflexively', which shows what the graduates 'did' to enhance their learning, the challenges and opportunities they came across and addressed as they secured their first graduate jobs. Table 2 contains illustrative examples of espoused and enacted learning practices.

Insert Table 2 about here

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the analysis by describing the two categories of 'espoused learning practices' and 'enacted learning practices'. Espoused learning practices

have three dimensions; focus, approach and suitability, in depicting a top-down planning approach. Enacted learning practices has three dimensions; discover, operate and evaluate, in revealing a bottom-up emergent approach. The dimensions in each category are distinct but interconnected. The examples presented in this section provides a more in-depth view through selected narrative threads from relevant participants.

Espoused Learning Practices

The dimensions of focus, approach and suitability were found in the articulation of espoused learning practices through two connected categories, learning goals and learning resources, each of which is addressed in turn below.

Learning Goals

'Learning goals' is the first category, and it is primarily the reasons why students intend to continue their learning and development immediately after they graduate. Students had some purpose for their learning, and not surprisingly, many chose to discuss the purpose of their learning at the start of their reflective accounts. Therefore, the dimension of 'focus' relates to the central aim of their learning, i.e. to gain employment in a particular profession, which in turn shaped their 'plan for action' in connecting with the other espoused learning practices category, 'learning resources'. Students generally used occupations as a way to frame the focus of their espoused learning practices. By far, most students wanted a role in a profession such as in accounting (e.g. P39), human resource management (e.g. P118), marketing (e.g. P81) and advertising (e.g. P172).

The second dimension that emerged was the 'approach' in terms of time horizon that the students expected to attain those goals. While students emphasised that time was an important factor, many described time in different ways, e.g. number of months or describing time as short, medium or long term. Some associated short term as three to five months (P3),

while for others, it was a year (P62). The interviews with the students, e.g. P81 and P111, helped clarify what they meant by time, and why time was an important factor in the way they approached their learning goals and therefore learning practices. For many students who were on a course that fitted their chosen profession, the approach they adopted were bound by a self-imposed timeline of generally about six months from graduation. While many acknowledged that they still had some learning to do, these students felt that by graduating from a course that is relevant to their early career, they expected to be 'pretty much be job-ready' (P92). In contrast, for example, students who had elected entrepreneurship as their 'occupation' had longer time horizons, between a year, and a year and a half. Some of these students reflected that they needed to do other work in the meantime to have some income to support themselves (e.g. P139), save up for the business (e.g. P77) or gain direct work experience in the sector that their business will be in the future (e.g. P206).

The third dimension is 'suitability'. This dimension is part of the students' reflective account that touches on the students' talents and aspirations that they used as a reference in assessing what they deem is suitable to them personally and to what degree. Although varied, the students' response generally related to their current skills set and their capacity to gain other skills required for the entry-level role in their chosen profession (although students at times conflate skills with personality dispositions) (P22). Students' assessment of the suitability of their learning goals was also based on their aspirations. While some did not think they had the innate talent to fit the role, they nonetheless had a strong desire to find a job in those professions (P62). Some students have used tools such as the Holland Occupational Themes (Astin, 1999) self-survey to identify what type of jobs is best suited for themselves, and this may have informed their choice of profession. The following are selected narratives from P17 that threads his learning goals and the three dimensions together:

"I would like to be in HR, which is why I took the HR pathway on my course. I am quite confident about getting a job [in this profession] (focus: HR profession). I had a placement in [Company A], which I liked, but I think I am more interested in the retail sector…I think I did a good job at [Company A], so I have a backup if I needed one… I am focussing on polishing on my interview skills, and I am hoping that I can land something in by the end autumn [which is six months or less from leaving university] (approach: short-term time horizon)…I tend to get along well with people, so I think I have chosen the right profession (suitability: based on intrinsic ability)."

Learning Resources

The second category is 'learning resources' that relates to how students intend to attain their learning goals. Students directed a significant portion of their reflective accounts to discuss what they needed and what they could do to make those resources available. The focus dimension was the type of resource they needed, in particular, resources that allow them to know-who (i.e. networking) (e.g. P144), know-what (knowledge) (e.g. P8) and know-how (skills) (e.g. P76) (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994). Of course, these resources are not mutually exclusive as all resources were found to be important, albeit sometimes prioritised differently depending on the time horizon (approach). For example, those who felt that they would be job-ready upon graduation focused their learning practices on job searching skills (e.g. networking) and interviewing skills (e.g. 206), as opposed to enhancing or gaining skills related to aspects of the profession that they felt they still needed after graduation. Indeed this was the case for some students who expressed the desire to do something slightly different from the usual career trajectory of their course (P86).

The second dimension of 'approach' concerns using resources that follows from the type of resources sought. Resources mainly include working in part-time jobs (P27) and in volunteer organisations (P33) to gain specific skills, using online learning tools, including free courses online and curation tools (P76), and attending seminars offered by professional bodies, and other learned societies and organisations (P12) to enhance their existing knowledge. Others would aim to employ professional career competency frameworks as a guide to knowledge accumulation and skills development (P118), leverage on their university's career department (P20), and envisaged tapping in the network of their former colleagues from their placements (P206) as a resource.

'Suitability' is the third dimension, and it refers to students' reflection on being able to maximise the resources that they have identified. Some reasons given was simply because these resources were readily available, e.g. family members' know-how and employer contacts that their university's career department possess (P26). Students also identified resources that they were already using, e.g. access to online courses, and resources that they did not have but could be obtained (albeit some appeared more readily attainable than others). These ranged from working in a small firm in which one of their parents were employed to anticipating someone from their social networks to introduce them to individuals with specific experiences who could help them.

The identification of resources at-hand and prospective resources indicates that student adopted a 'causal' approach (Chia & Holt, 2008) that involved, first identifying goals and then resources to enable the fulfilment of the goals. The 'reasons' in their choice of resources also pertained to how the resources match one another. The more insightful accounts contained students' reflection on how these resources could be synergistic if employed in a complementary manner in their specific context. The interviews were more revealing as it presented an opportunity for some of the students to provide deeper

consideration of how these resources can be used together than they had shown in their written work. The following narrative is drawn from P132, who wanted to get into business with the opening of his own coffee shop 'on-wheels' aimed at events and festivals:

> *"My main concern has been finding someone who has been on the circuit – who knows the events and festivals that I could target (focus: know-who)...I have friends working at festivals, so I know I can rely on them, but the rest is really getting to know the people they know (approach: socialising and using friends' networks)...I think my coffee-making skills are quite all right having worked with [Coffee Place A] and [Coffee Place B] as a barista, but I think there is more that I could learn. I think my business idea is quite a niche, so I don't think there is a textbook out there that I buy and read, so I will have to rely on people with the experience (suitability: networking is suitable given the novelty of the business idea)."*

The entanglement of goals and resources

The 'focus' dimensions relate to the students' learning practice aims and the resources that they plan to draw upon. The 'approach' is the conjectured roadmap in terms of time horizon and the types of resources to be deployed. And 'suitability' is the students' assessment of their learning goals against personal aspiration and the prospect of maximising the use of envisaged resources. These three dimensions are independent but also intertwined. For example, as part of a coherent 'plan', the 'approach' related to short time horizons in the learning goals category is allied to resources related to 'know-who' in the 'focus' dimension of learning resources, as networks can help expedite learning by unlocking opportunities.

The findings from the Phase 2 interviews (e.g. the quotes from P17 in the 'learning goals' sub-section and P132 in the 'learning resources) were useful in providing a synoptic perspective of 'what' (and why) goals and resources are most important to students in helping them attain their learning goals. The students' espoused learning practices demonstrate that

they do have some form of a 'plan' (of varying degrees of plausibility and rigour) when they graduate and that they have an idea of the learning practices that they intend to employ to help them commence their early careers.

Enacted Learning Practices

The dimensions of discover, operate and evaluate were found in the articulation of enacted learning practices through two connected categories, learning activities and learning reflexively, each of which is addressed in turn below.

Learning Activities

Learning activities is the first category that relates to the graduates' experiences. While students' espoused learning practices demonstrated their ability to 'plan' their learning practices based on predetermined goals followed by identifying resources, the graduates' enacted learning practices are based on what they did do. The first dimension is 'discover' that involves finding and accessing learning activities. Some of the more common response from the interviewees was discovering the sheer number of online courses (P172). Indeed, the process of discovery was also experienced by graduates who used social media where "*one thing led to another*" in linking them with a new set of networks (P37). The process of discovery also led graduates to access unexpected learning activities, or derive benefit from those they had not planned to use (P78). Some of the graduates voiced that there were fees associated with some of the activities that they were interested in, but because they were on a tight budget, they felt it was best to search for activities that were free and came closest in meeting their needs. A few reported that given the volume of learning activities online and learning events in cities, they were able to discover 'good enough' alternatives by themselves or through others via social media such as LinkedIn.

The second dimension is 'operate'. This dimension is not just solely about the learning activities per se. It was also significantly about how the learning activities are

prioritised and coordinated, not just with one another but also with the graduates' family responsibilities, their social lives, part-time work, and preparation for job interviews. While not all students, by their admission, were completely organised (P77), many said that over time they had learned that they had to be more systematic in the way they approached looking for a job. While the first month after leaving university was chaotic (P92), many felt that once they settled into a new routine, they had more structure in their lives. Some felt that being organised was inevitable as "*this was the only way to make the most of my time*" (P56). Many of the interviewees touched on the blurring between 'work' and social life. P144 said that *"you meet new people at networking events…on the one hand, the event is aimed at professional networking, but on the other hand, some of these people then become your friends… socialising becomes the best way to learn"*. Some went back to their hometowns to live with their parents temporarily as they sought their first graduate jobs. P12 mentioned that she organised her Wednesdays around family-related commitments. Graduates also learned to 'connect' not just with other graduates but also their learning activities, to create a portfolio of learning resources. P12 said that while many learning events she participated in were discrete, there was a natural sequence to some that she tried to attend.

The third dimension is 'evaluate' that involved graduates assessing the value they feel they received from the learning activities. More specifically, they examined whether the learning activity had enhanced their existing knowledge and skills (PP44) or enabled them to learn new ones (PP186). The routine of informally evaluating their learning activity enabled some of the graduates to be more discerning in their choice of future learning activities to engage in and thereby get more value for their time. P186 attended a networking event of marketers with a theme on big data for customer intelligence. There, he joined an informal group at the event who were comparing customer relationship systems in their organisations. He felt both the formal event and informal discussions helped him with his interview

preparations. Some evaluated on the whole experience of looking for their first job. P44 stated that he feels the autonomous learning experience in looking for a job is a skill on its own and thinks he is now a 'bit savvier'. The following draws on the selected narrative about P81's experiences in the learning activity category:

> *"There is a lot out there [learning activities and events]. You just need to know where to look and whom to ask (discover: finding access)….to be honest, there was more out there than I thought there was. I never looked seriously, but when I did, there were many opportunities and it was just a matter of which ones to choose and fitting them together (operate: prioritise and coordinate)….there were some that were really good and others, not so….overtime, I learned to be more picky and only signed up for events and activities that I was confident I would learn from (evaluation: knowledge enhancement/ development)."*

Sociomateriality clearly plays a part in graduates' learning activities. In all three dimensions, technology played a varied, from essential to the peripheral, but ubiquitous role. For example, technology was essential in accessing Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS) platforms (P76) but played a more peripheral role at learning events involving live presentations in-situ (P81). From a social perspective, the findings show that demarcation between 'work' and social life can be indistinct. For many individuals in their early 20s, social life and making new friends tends to be a significant part of their lives. Therefore the blurring between social and work lives is a common finding from the graduates interviewed.

Learning Reflexively

Once students settled into a routine in their new 'lives' they inevitably experienced unexpected and intermediate disruptions to these routines. Learning reflexively is a unique

category because it reflects learning practices that may not have surfaced if disruptions had not emerged. The 'discover' dimension reflects encounters with the unexpected that cause tensions and dilemmas. One of the significant tensions that the graduates mentioned was between working with a plan and being flexible (P73). Interviewees suggested that while the 'top-down' approach in planning emphasised by their tutors had served them well in the university, this did not work well in the real world. The interviewees acknowledged that they did not entirely adhere to their espoused learning practices (in fact some could not completely recall what their espoused learning practices were) but allowed themselves to settle into a routine before they could have any clarity on what to do next (P111).

Nonetheless, many mentioned that disruption was a regular feature. In an example of where sociomateriality can be an 'impediment', typical disruptions cited by graduates include family emergencies occurring when they had other commitments or being readily contactable on their communication devices to do extra shifts at their part-time jobs (that were not based on zero-hour contracts). Over time, some graduates learned to live with these tensions, in particular, learning to manage and reset their expectations (P111). While this was not the panacea to dealing with the tensions, it appeared to help to some extent in balancing the need to plan but at the same be flexible (P12). A lesson that many voiced was to expect tensions and even paradoxical challenges to emerge. In an example of sociomateriality being 'advantageous', several graduates mentioned that they learned from these situations and changed the way they plan their days by paying more attention to logistical arrangements such as transport and time management by using their communication devices more effectively (P111 and P186).

In the 'operate' dimension, graduates showed what they 'did' reflexively in dealing with the unexpected, including improvising and anticipating with contingency plans. Improvising includes adapting activities *"on the fly"* (P42) and dealing with emergent

challenges (P77). However, improvising did not always occur due to 'problems' as it also ensued when graduates wanted to be efficient such as using learning technologies as a way to enhance their productivity (P35). Some graduates also reported that over time they subconsciously developed contingency plans after having experienced setbacks. They learned that things may not always go according to plan in any given day, so they tend to have a "*Plan B*" and in some cases a range of contingency practices that they can call upon when needed (P51).

Finally, 'evaluate' involved graduates' awareness of their learning to be reflexive and learning from being reflexive. Learning to be reflexive involved students evaluating their reactions to particular situations. P92 said there were quite a few interviews he had been to that involved at least one question that he did not expect. He felt he has learned to "think on his feet" much more in the last few months than he ever had over the last few years, which has helped him learn to react and make decisions more swiftly. In learning from being reflexive, P105 felt that by she learned to "not just be better in being flexible but also more confident in more ways to be flexible," i.e. not just to learn to accept one has to be flexible but also 'how' to be flexible. P92 said he learned to appreciate incidental learning. He mentioned that by going with the 'flow', he had learned about other things that he had not intended to learn and how they became useful to him. The following draws selected narrative from P73's experiences in demonstrating learning reflexively:

> *"…it's a balancing act in knowing how to plan…things clash, and I sometimes findings myself having to forego something…this is not always a problem, but there are times there are knock-on effects, and I have to let someone down…sometimes it is inevitable but doesn't make it any less stressful (discover: tensions)…I regularly try to be creative and take advantage of what I do have and what I can do when things don't go according to plan...like when my train is cancelled…I have to work around*

it…(operate: improvise)…I think these experiences have made me be able to think and decide faster (evaluation: learning to be reflexive)…and to look out and think about the unexpected [and incidentals] (that I have learned from) (evaluation: learning from being reflexive).”

The entanglement of learning activities and learning reflexively

The 'learning activity' category is about settling into a routine where 'work', family and social life feature in harmony. Learning reflexively is about dealing with the micro disruptions that the graduates faced after settling into a routine. Graduates have shown to be aware of the tensions and dilemmas that life can throw at them, and some had been proactive in dealing with these challenges, e.g. anticipating with some form of a ‘mental Plan B’. This category shows that in enacted learning practices there is a need for graduates to be more aware and responsive to their circumstances, and to work with what is available in a way that is appropriate for their personal situations. Disruptions are inevitable, and whether it is major or minor, graduates need to be reflexive and to learn from their reflexive responses. Technology was envisaged (in espoused learning practices) and used (in enacted learning practices) pervasively in different ways.

The graduates’ enacted learning practices is about ‘how’ they learned in real life, which is in contrast to ‘what’ they learned in their business school as shown in the espoused learning practices findings. The interviews revealed how students had to ‘unlearn’ some of the knowledge they acquired about learning practices for employability and reset expectations as necessitated by new their realities. As part of their journey in securing their first graduate jobs, the findings show how the graduates had to ‘re-learn’ their learning practices in reflecting their immediate sociomaterial surroundings.

Summary: Espoused vs Enacted Learning Practices

Given both categories are about learning practices, it is not surprising that the dimensions are similar; however, they are not interchangeable. Espoused learning practices are conjectures, and enacted learning practices are experienced. Graduates' enacted practices are emergent, especially when dealing with situations that they may not have anticipated. Consequently, there is a divergence between espoused and enacted learning practices as the findings show the transition the graduates had to make as they develop their early careers in the 'real world'.

The students' espoused practices outlined their goals and plans underpinned by their perceptions of their talents and personal aspirations. More specifically, the reflective accounts and the first round of interviews showed the students' conation in terms of what they intended to do and learn in pursuit of their first graduate role (Kurczewska, Kyrö, Lagus, Kohonen, & Lindh-Knuutila, 2018). The data indicate that students' espoused learning practices largely reflect a top-down approach with students first determining their learning goals and then identifying the resources they need (Günzel-Jensen & Robinson, 2017). Such a conative pattern reflects a type of 'causal knowledge', which is typically learned in business schools (Chia & Holt, 2008) that is used in established organisational settings as it is the standard approach that many firms adopt in the mobilisation of their resources. If this study was about how well students have learned what they are taught, then to some degree, business schools might be judged to be doing a reasonable job.

However, the question is about how prepared are fresh graduates for the early stages of their careers, and the study finds that there is a discrepancy between what they learn in business schools and what they put into practice. The second interviews show that graduates' reality, when they leave university, is markedly different, and they need to make significant adjustments. Indeed, while some universities may have adopted innovative teaching in the classroom to develop independent learning (Raelin, 2007), these methods are unlikely to be

an adequate substitute in developing learning practices beyond the boundaries of the classroom or even the university. In addition, although business schools have enabled students to 'learn by doing' through university-supported placements and internships, the strong scaffolds for learning that remain may inadvertently circumvent the development of practices that can help prepare graduates to truly learn autonomously.

From the second interviews, the graduates reveal their enacted practices in obtaining their first jobs (Corradi et al., 2010) that enabled them to make the adjustments as they transition from university life. The enacted learning practices reflect a 'bottom-up', emergent effectuation process (Sarasvathy, 2008; Watson & McGowan, 2019) as decisions and actions are based on what is available and contingent on one's situation. This process enabled graduates to make the best out of their circumstances.

In summary, findings from the reflective accounts and the first set of interviews show that students' espoused learning practices involve 'learning goals' that engages a top-down approach in identifying predetermined goals and followed by identifying 'learning resources'. Students assess the suitability of these goals and resources based on their talents and aspirations. In contrast, 'enacted learning practices', informed by the second set of interviews, show what graduates actually 'did' using a bottom-up approach. The category of 'learning activity' is a process that first involves graduates settling into a routine and then identifying learning opportunities that fit into their social and material situations. Graduates also then had to learn reflexively in learning to deal with unexpected and micro disruptions in their daily lives.

DISCUSSION AND THEORY DEVELOPMENT

Against a backdrop of an increasingly competitive labour market and business schools' endeavour to enable their fresh graduates to 'hit the ground running', this study explored the question, *"How do fresh graduates establish and engage in learning practices in the early*

stages of their practitioner careers?" The findings lead to insights in three areas that address this question: how individuals enact practices for learning; how sociomaterial context influences the shape of these practices; and how learning practices are involved in learning careers.

Practices for Learning: 'Doing to Learn'

The findings show that learning activity and learning reflexively come together uniquely in providing a more nuanced view of the complementary relationship between practice and learning, and builds upon two primary perspectives in extant literature. The first type of learning practice is practice-based learning or work-based learning that suggest that there is '*learning by doing'* (Feldman & Worline, 2016). Practice-based learning observes learning as an expected outcome in the context of educational and organisational settings as learners learn through the medium of practice. The second, which is a practice-based standpoint, suggests that there is '*learning in doing*'. In 'learning in doing', the practice is the locus for understanding situated learning and learning is a *"bridge between working and innovating*" (J.S. Brown & Duguid, 1991, p. 41) as practitioners learn new ways through their practice.

However, these two perspectives do not include what people do in preparation for their learning. Therefore, I argue for a third perspective, *doing to learn,* i.e. 'practices for learning', as this study's first contribution. *Doing to learn* is the practice of preparing to learn as the findings show through the learning activity (e.g. prioritise and coordinate learning activities) and learning reflexively categories (i.e. improvising in daily routines so that learning can take place). Practices for learning can have a significant influence on what graduates learn 'intentionally' and 'incidentally'. This third perspective builds upon the notion of *practice-as-constitutive* (Hibbert et al., 2016) in taking a more nuanced view of the duality between practice and learning.

This research also builds on Sandberg and Tsoukas' (2011) recognition of reflexivity, in particular, the role it plays when individuals experience 'temporary breakdowns', as they suggest that there is a reinforcing virtuous circle in the logic of practice involving reflexivity and routine. Reflexivity and routine are not easily separable as the findings show that the graduates 'learn to be reflexive' and 'learn from reflexivity', which over time becomes a norm. In other words, reflexivity becomes a routine (e.g. being flexible becomes second nature) and routines are more reflexive (e.g. there are 'buffers' in routines to cater for disruptions).

Nonetheless, while actions are that of the individual, practice is always social (Nicolini, 2012) as it is the collective 'doing' embedded in the ecology of the social and physical worlds that gives practices meaning (Corradi et al., 2010). A corollary finding from the study suggests the emergence of a practice-of-community whereby it is the activity that defines the community rather than assuming that it is the community that determines what is practised (Gherardi, 2009). The practice for learning in the early careers of graduates can be said to be a practice of a community that is facilitated by technology and network externalities (Li, Wang, & Tan, 2018) in enabling the practice of the community to grow by temporally converging but yet remaining spatially dispersed. For example, social media provide members of the community (i.e. early career graduates) the opportunity to connect and learn from one another (e.g. read each other's reviews of events) while being locationally distributed. The use of technology means that members of the community indirectly shape each other's practices (Gherardi & Strati, 2012). This community does not stay the same because over time, due to generational change, present community members will move into their mid-career stage, and a new generation of fresh graduates emerge. While the practice of this community largely remains comparable over time, i.e. what to learn, where to learn,

whom to learn from, and when to learn, the sociomaterial context will change as new types of jobs will emerge (as some jobs will also become obsolete), as will new technologies.

Shaping Practices for Learning

For the second contribution, I argue that practices for learning are the nexus between exogenous sociomateriality and endogenous self-directed learning. While sociomateriality and self-directed learning also play a role in other forms of learning practices (Gherardi, Meriläinen, Strati, & Valtonen, 2013; Nicolini, 2011), sociomateriality is particularly prominent and pervasive in practices for learning. Practices for learning calls upon continual reflexivity in navigating in and around the personal and professional dimensions of one's life. The learning activity category showed the significant role of 'the social' that influenced how graduates prepared for their learning as they searched for their first graduate role. Such findings demonstrated that learning activity is a process of discover, operate and evaluate (Chia & MacKay, 2007), and that graduates could not entirely 'dictate' what they wanted to do. Instead, they had to find and settle into a routine that was dependent on various factors, including those that were career-related such as part-time jobs, and factors related to their family and social life.

Furthermore in some cases, technology was *essential* in some of the graduates' practices for learning. However, the role and advantage of technology and other 'materials' are relative and dependent on one another. For example, some graduates' possession and access to technologies varied depending on their social support. Such constitutive entanglement between the social and material worlds (Orlikowski, 2000, 2009) was evident in practices for learning. Sociomateriality is at the centre of what graduates had to do, working with and around these affordances and constraints so that their learning can eventually take place (Balogun et al., 2014; Leonardi, 2012).

The notion of self-directed learning also plays a vital role as practices for learning would also not be possible without human agency. Thus, while enacted practices were emergent, the findings confirm the insights of De Vos, De Clippeleer, and Dewilde (2009) who argue that proactivity is important, as is a direction towards future impact (Grant & Ashford, 2008), in the self-directed learning dimension of learning practices. The view of practices for learning as a nexus between sociomateriality and self-directed learning allows us to gain a new perspective on how graduates, as motivated 'actors', deal with the sociomaterial world. Graduates' practices for learning show how they are the key actors in the process of *agencement* as they bring together and connect the different (Gherardi, 2016), and unplanned aspects of their new phase of life. While extant literature describes the process of bringing together the social and material as an imbrication (Leonardi, 2013), this study suggests, in particular through the category of learning reflexively, that this process can be loosely structured and reflect a process of 'inventing while doing' (Gherardi, 2016).

Practices for Learning in Learning Careers

The underlying principle demonstrated by the participants' transition from student to graduate in search of their first graduate jobs shows that learning was mostly, if not completely, autonomous. Graduates had to plan and organise their own learning for the new 'venture' that is their early careers. Thus, early careers are a distinct episode in their 'learning careers' that is supported by a unique set of practices for learning.

It is not implausible that the need to undertake practices for learning may be relevant in other similar situations such as when individuals change careers, especially when the new career is fundamentally dissimilar to the previous. Therefore I speculate that individuals' learning careers are a pattern of punctuated 'episodes' that are accompanied by a relatively unique set of practices for learning. Each episode's practices for learning are distinct because

they are temporally and spatially shaped. In other words, what learners do and able to do are dependent on where they are in their careers, and technologies available, and other situational factors (Gherardi, 2016). The notion that learning careers are punctuated by episodes of change accompanied by unique practices for learning, shaped by sociomateriality, enriches careers literature in the management field that has primarily focused on the embeddedness of protean careers (Allan & Lewis, 2009).

The practice for learning in each episode is as vital as the learning itself because it highlights how situational factors combine with social phenomena to influence learning careers (Schatzki, 2001). Indeed, sociomaterial factors, in addition to affording or constraining learners, can also be the catalyst for change in individuals' learning careers (Leonardi, 2012). For instance, a change in a person's context and circumstances can be a moment of emancipation that allows them to take more risks in life, such as starting a business.

I further speculate that practices for learning do not just remain the same for each individual. Individuals' practices for learning are likely to 'expand' as suggested by the findings that highlight graduates' recognition of developing a portfolio or range of practices (Engestrom, 2016). By enhancing their practices for learning to meet the challenges of change, graduates may become more proficient in managing new episodes that emerge in their learning careers. For example, they can become more skilful in learning to learn from networks in developing the appropriate relationships to engage and learn from others (Engestrom & Sannino, 2016). Indeed, for individuals with a portfolio career where each 'job' is distinct from one another, they may develop different repertoires of practices for learning (Engestrom & Sannino, 2017). These repertoires intertwine that allow the individual to find synergies between practices for learning as they cross 'professional' boundaries (Scaratti et al., 2017).

Practical Implications

The differences between espoused to enacted practices for learning substantiates the arguments of Kennedy et al. (2015) in that the contrastive difference between learning in academia and practice potentially places university students at a disadvantage. While these findings suggest that the graduates' transition from university to the 'real world' was not overwhelmingly difficult, it was indeed challenging. As a result, business schools may need to question if they are preparing their students well enough to 'hit the ground running', as advocated by many business schools in their recruitment of students. It is envisaged that people will need to become more capable in their practices for learning in meeting the challenges of change (Crick et al., 2013). This study suggests how management educators can nurture a capacity for lifelong learning by co-creating learning environments and curriculum with students to develop their practices for learning (Volles, 2014). As the study has shown, practices for learning can be utilised to realise intended learning and at the same time, take advantage of emergent, incidental learning (Vermeulen & Schmidt, 2008).

This study also informs the practice of teaching in higher education. The conceptual understanding of graduates' practices for learning informs teaching professionals on approaches to developing students' skills in opportunistically engaging with emergent learning practices, instilling a sense of autonomy and confidence while countering spoon-feeding. To support this, students should be given opportunities to reflect on their future journey in their early careers, such as the use of reflective accounts in this study, so that they start thinking about life (professional and personal) after university as soon as possible (T. Brown, McCracken, & O'Kane, 2011).

Another critical practical implication is the development of curation skills and learning to 'discover'. The findings revealed the graduates' curation abilities as they brought

together learning objects and learning networks, which they then organised into ‘portfolios’, to support their development for different aspects of their early careers. Curation is growing as a valuable ability especially in taking advantage of a content-laden virtual world. Curation can be used in the classroom as a surrogate for 'real-life' practices for learning. Students can curate learning objects (e.g. books, videos and websites) that they feel are most relevant. Students should be encouraged to learn how to 'seek out' learning opportunities that can be accessed using their devices, and to be able to evaluate material that can genuinely help them in their learning.

Business schools can also invite former students who have obtained graduate jobs to return to give talks to the current cohort of students on their experiences and practices for learning. These 'live cases' not only allow current students to understand and gain insight to the different strategies, tactics and activities for early careers but can also help to build confidence as recent graduates are more relatable (Culpin & Scott, 2012).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are two main limitations to this research which suggest avenues for further research, as well as a more general opportunity. First, the sample of graduates who participated in the second interview only involved those who were successful in obtaining their first graduate role. While this group of participants provides us with an insight into practices for learning that have been successful for the individuals, there may have been other practices that were not captured. Indeed, practices for learning are not just situated, but it is also individualised, so there may be more variability across individuals in the social context. Therefore future research may adopt a longer time horizon to interview graduates over time, involving those who have been successful and those still striving, in gaining different insight to the practices for learning. Indeed, in the face of adversity, more innovative practices may emerge

(Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). Such future studies may purposefully select students from different groups (e.g. by gender, minority groups, different academic achievement and from post-experiential instruction graduate courses such as MBAs) to track over some time.

A second limitation involves data collection methods using reflective accounts and interviews. While these methods allow a balance for participants to be thoughtful while being candid, an ethnographic approach may enable researchers to identify actions and activities that may not be thought to have any meaning to the participants, but to a more trained eye, maybe material (Black & Warhurst, 2019). As part of an ethnographic approach, observations can be employed to identify practices undertaken that may have been mistakenly overlooked and forgotten by the participants. Nonetheless, ethnographic methods also have disadvantages such as researchers' interpretive biases and the surfacing of ethically challenging dilemmas. Future research adopting this approach will require a robust triangulation framework.

As discussed, the notion of sociomateriality and self-directed learning are complementary. To gain further insight into the relationship between sociomateriality and self-directed learning, future research can adopt an interdisciplinary study that traverses the fields of sociology and psychology. Specifically, future research may explore how the activities that underpin practices for learning shape individuals' resilience, as a form of personal resource capacity (Youssef & Luthans, 2007), and vice versa. The nature of practices for learning may be supported by the confidence individuals have in that they have sufficient personal resourcefulness to adapt to new situations and thrive in unfamiliar environments. Future research into this area is topical given the growing attention directed towards universities' support for student wellbeing and their development of their students' resilience. Given the potential promise of practices for learning, future researchers are encouraged to adopt an; 1) expanded sample of students from different demographics and other relevant groups, 2) ethnography-based methodology over an extended period of time

and 3) interdisciplinary approach combining sociology and psychology to explore the relationship between practices for learning with intrapersonal factors.

CONCLUSION

This research explored the question, *"How do fresh graduates prepare themselves for the early stages of their careers through the use of learning practices?"* The study found a gap between students' espoused and enacted learning practices that highlighted the disconnect between the participants' expectations before they leave university and their reality when they graduate. Espoused learning practices' involved a top-down goal-orientated approach that is supported by the students' identification of appropriate and available 'learning resources' help themselves attain these goals. Enacted learning practices involved an opportunistic and emergent bottom-up process that involved graduates' actual activities and how they had to be reflexive in managing their learning for their early careers.

This study makes three contributions. First, I showed a nuanced view of learning practices in the form of practices for learning that involves '*doing to learn'*. Second, I offered insight from the coalescences of sociomateriality and self-directed learning in shaping tailored practices for learning that support early-career success. Third, I presented a more granular notion of learning careers that involved the emergence of distinctive practices for learning over time that can enable individuals to surmount challenges linked to pivotal junctures in their graduates' careers, in particular their early careers and future career changes.

In terms of practical implications, business schools can enhance students' practices for learning by providing them more opportunities to develop their curation skills. Curating allows students to be autonomous and to learn by 'discovery'. Management educators can also develop students' practices for learning by engaging students to co-create learning

environments and curriculum. The sustained promotion of practices for learning can nurture students' positive dispositions towards lifelog learning as they become more proficient in finding new ways to learn and develop.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1: Data Collected

Phase 1: Reflective accounts Total number of scripts: 208 Total word count for all scripts: 210,156. The reflective accounts were submitted anonymously at the end of the module. In the module, 173 students were taking a Business Management degree, 21 Psychology degree, and 14 Sports degree. Each reflective account was given a number i.e. Participant 1, that was matched to the script number, which contained the student's university identification number.
Phase 2: Pre-graduation interviews Total number of interviewees: 64 Method: in-person 34, video conferencing 30. Average interview time per person: 35 minutes. Total interview time: 37.3 hours
Phase 3: Post-graduation interviews Total number of interviewees: 28 Method: in-person 8, video conferencing 16, phone 4. Average interview time per person: 70 minutes. Total interview time: 32.6 hours

Table 2: Summary of Categories of Espoused and Enacted Learning Practices

Categories of espoused learning practices	***Category dimensions of espoused learning practices***		
	Focus	***Approach***	***Suitability***
Learning goals	Career type *I am going to carry on with my training with ICAEW [Institute of Chartered Accountant in England and Wales], which I currently feel is my most preferred career direction [being an accountant] (P39)*	Time horizon *I am quite drawn to project management. Quite a few universities offer masters course in it, but there are also professional courses that I can take, which I hear is more valued by industry…At this moment I am more likely to go with the professional certification route [before looking for a job]…It'll take time but I think it's the better way [long term] (P117)*	Talent and aspirations *I have always been interested in the way brands work. I think I am quite good in understanding consumers and trends...I would like to a CMO [Chief Marketing Officer] (P22)*
Learning resources	Type of resources *Even after my placement, I still keep in touch with some of my ex-colleagues. I especially keep in touch with my old boss, he's a really good mentor, can help introduce people from industry to me [know-who], and he's not too far from me [location] (P206)*	Using resources *I use the CIPD [Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development] People Management Profession Map…as a guide for my learning and development… to become a HR Manager (P118)*	Maximise available resource *I am using the Business Model Canvas - this was a great tool introduced by one of my tutors. I have family who business owners and they can help me with ideas in making my idea a reality [using this tool] (P132)*
Categories of enacted learning practices	***Category dimensions of enacted learning practices***		
	Discover	***Operate***	***Evaluate***
Learning activities	Finding access *There are many posting on LinkedIn about learning events…Some are easily accessible but you need to dig more for others [to gain access] (P176)]*	Prioritise and coordinate *I help my partner care for her kids, so that's part of my routine. It's not far and they are quite good [well behaved] but I still have to juggle my learning and part-time work (P12)*	Enhance/ gain skills *..time is precious, while I do experiment [with new events], I also think about how the event has helped me enhance my existing skills or even knowledge (P44)*
Learning reflexively	Tensions *I've learned to manage my own expectation…there's clashes…I thought balancing my part-time job with my partner and my development [in finding a graduate role] would have been more straightforward (P73)*	Improvisation *…things don't always go according to plan, actually most of time [it does not go according to plan]. So it's really about thinking on your feet and workaround things at the last minute (P51)*	Valuing incidental learning *It's been an experience. I look back at some of the things I learned by accident [incidentally] and some of them have turned out pretty helpful (P92)*

Figure 1: Coding Process

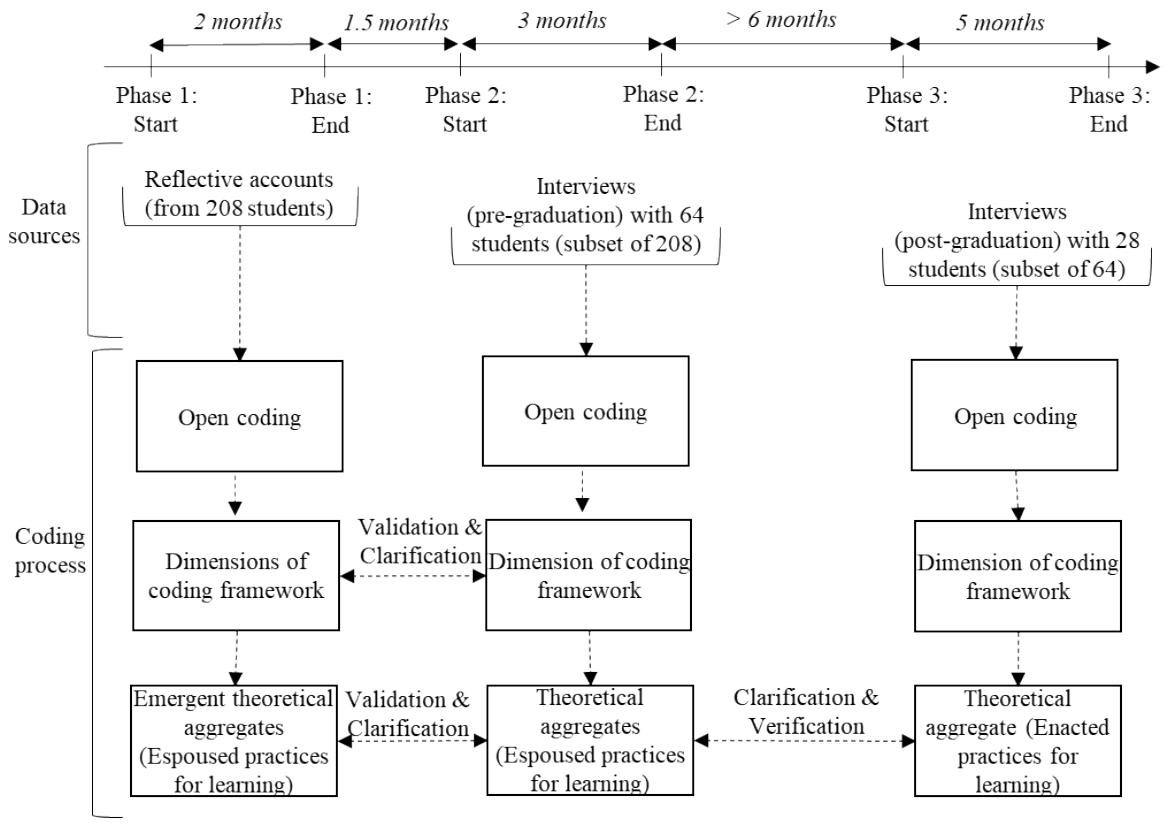

Figure 2: Data Structure