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## **Learning everyday entrepreneurial practices through coworking**

### **Abstract**

This article aims to understand learning in coworking. Coworking is an emergent global phenomenon that involves independent workers, often from various occupational backgrounds, working collectively in shared work spaces. I situate coworking in broader debates on entrepreneurialism and socioeconomic change to conceptualise it as a twofold process: of learning everyday coworking practices, and learning through coworking practices. While coworking, individuals learn to make sense of their place in the entrepreneurial milieu by developing practices that contest established entrepreneurial norms. Drawing on an ethnographic study, I show how coworkers learn to become collaborative, intentional, and to perform contestation through co-created situated learning. That learning enables them to co-construct a sense of community necessary to become entrepreneurially proficient in an increasingly uncertain world of work. By critically understanding why and how learning occurs in coworking, this research contributes to our knowledge of what learning is, and why and where it can occur.

### **Keywords:**

Coworking; entrepreneurialism; everyday practices; learning; legitimate peripheral participation.

## Introduction

Increasingly uncertain social and economic conditions require us to become entrepreneurially proficient, mobile and agential. Such requirements create a sense of unfixedness in contemporary occupational identities (Loacker and Śliwa, 2016), and at the same time a need to learn how to organise everyday life and work within these uncertainties. It is understood that such learning needs to occur in situations that foster reimagining and re-enacting of the ways we organise the socialities of the learning process (Beyes and Michels, 2011; Bissola et al., 2017; Bureau and Komporozos-Athanasίου, 2016). Hence it is necessary to understand where and how entrepreneurial individuals learn to develop their everyday practices. This article identifies coworking as a site where those practices are developed.

Coworking is a contemporary phenomenon that experiments with ways of organising (Parrino, 2015; Schmidt et al., 2014; Spinuzzi, 2012) through communal working (Brown, 2017; Garrett et al., 2017; Merkel, 2017). Though fluid and emergent, (Spinuzzi, 2012), coworking claims widespread participation and exponential growth, with more than 7,800 coworking spaces globally and approximately 510,000 coworkers in 2015, since its origins in the mid-2000s (Author1). Gandini (2015) and Merkel (2015) note that the growth of coworking coincided with the 2007-8 Global Financial Crisis. More

generally, coworking has been found to be indicative of the broader social change that creates increasing demands for entrepreneurial, self-employed and flexible work (Author<sub>1</sub>; Gandini, 2015; Spinuzzi, 2012).

Spinuzzi (2012) observes that coworking involves a diversity of individuals, often from various occupational backgrounds, working collectively in shared, open-plan workspaces. According to Author<sub>1</sub>, many coworkers identify themselves as working in the creative industries, particularly new media, such as software engineering and web development, graphic and web design, professional relations, and marketing consultancy. Author<sub>1</sub> defines coworkers as independent knowledge workers who identify with at least one of three categories of contemporary occupation: freelancing, early stage entrepreneurship or startups and small business teams. Journalists, writers, architects and artists are also identified, but more interestingly, Author<sub>1</sub> finds a fluidity to coworkers' occupational identities.

Coworkers pay a membership fee to a coworking space provider in exchange for access to an open-plan workspace, which creates socialities that independent workers would not otherwise have (Garrett et al., 2017; Merkel, 2015). Coworking is therefore typically marketed by coworking space providers and described by coworkers as a form of community (Author<sub>2</sub>; Garrett et al., 2017; Merkel, 2015). What has stimulated most

scholarly interest to date has been how coworking socialities are constructed. Garrett et al. (2017) describe a process of ‘community work’ that enables individuals to become increasingly embedded in the norms of a coworking space to foster a sense of belonging. The literature consistently shows coworking socialities to be organised for and by members through what coworking protagonists call ‘curation’ of community via various forms of exchange (Author2; Brown, 2017; Fuzi, 2015; Merkel, 2015; Parrino, 2015). Consequently, coworking is found to provide opportunities to build entrepreneurial social capital (Gandini, 2015; Spinuzzi, 2012). Each of these features makes coworking worthy of scholarly research as a site of learning. Unsurprisingly, each author signals the connections made through coworking and the consequent potential for learning to occur. However, little is known about how learning happens in coworking, and what exactly is learned.

In this article, I empirically explore learning in coworking spaces through a longitudinal ethnographic study of coworking in Melbourne, London, and Dallas. Following Lave and Wenger (1991), I show how coworking is a situated learning process – a socio-spatial process, whereby individual and collective identities are produced through participation in and development of cultural practices that involve circulation of knowledge amongst peers. I apply Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation to understand how coworkers learn from others to become attuned to the entrepreneurial

milieu by participating in shared organisational practices. Further, I draw on the concept of everyday practice as potentially creative, adaptive and defiant, and thus contestational (De Certeau, 1998; Scott, 2009). I show how learning in coworking is generated by and generative of everyday organisational practices that support contestations of established entrepreneurial norms. Specifically, I address the following research questions: Why do individuals cowork? What and how do individuals learn through coworking? What implications does this have for our understanding of learning in coworking, and for the broader appreciation of the importance of everyday practice in the context of learning?

The study shows that when individuals cowork they engage in legitimate peripheral participation that enables them to construct a coworking community. In doing so they learn to develop a range of collaborative everyday practices that can generate a sense of entrepreneurialism. In the process, coworkers learn how to become collaborative, how to become intentional, and how to perform contestation. Altogether, this learning enables coworkers to develop practices that foster a collective sense of purpose and thereby enhance their individual abilities to become entrepreneurially proficient. The research demonstrates that there is scope for learning to occur through appropriation of everyday practices to construct occupational identities within uncertain and precarious conditions. Following from this study, I propose further research into the learning that occurs through

everyday practices that make space for alternative ways of organising, and enable individuals to navigate collectively through an increasingly uncertain world of work.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The next section provides discussion of extant literature on coworking and entrepreneurship to understand why individuals cowork. Subsequently I use the concept of legitimate peripheral participation to understand how individuals learn to cowork, before conceptualising the everyday practices of coworking as being a means through which coworkers learn to contest entrepreneurial norms. I then elaborate on the ethnographic methods employed, before presenting analysis of the empirical materials. Finally, I offer discussion of research insights and outline the study's theoretical and empirical contributions, as well as providing propositions for future research.

## **Why cowork?**

Coworking emerged in 2005 (Brown, 2017; Gandini, 2015) and grew globally in the late-2000s (Gandini, 2015; Merkel, 2015; Spinuzzi, 2012). To understand why people cowork, it is important to consider both individual motivations for coworking set against the current socioeconomic context and changes in the world of work, as well as the place of coworking as one of a number of recent sociological phenomena associated with

entrepreneurial initiatives and community building. With regard to the former, Spinuzzi (2012) describes coworking as ‘working alone together’, which he derives from the contradictions he finds in coworking, where individuals not only come to work but also to engage in social activities. Merkel (2015) finds coworking to be an escape from the social isolations of independent working. It offers mutual support through its organisational design to many coworkers who would otherwise work from home (Merkel, 2015). The freedom to work from anywhere, Spinuzzi (2012) argues, restricts opportunities for collaboration and networking, thereby fostering a sense of isolation, which can lead to an inability to build trust and relationships with others. Gregg (2011) illustrates how remote working profoundly affects a broad range of workers whose lives are increasingly unsettled by contemporary flexible working conditions. Similarly, Loacker and Śliwa (2016) find occupational identity tensions associated with attempts to play an active role in meeting demands for flexibility, mobility and adaptability, while also being forced to do so through precarity. Work-related precarity refers to all forms of insecure, contingent and flexible work (Gill and Pratt, 2008). As structural conditions shift, professions previously considered secure are becoming less so (Loacker and Śliwa, 2016). Merkel (2015) suggests that coworking is a means for independent workers to cope with their sense of precarity.

There is, however, more to understanding ‘why cowork?’ than framing it as an individual response to labour market precarity and occupational identity tensions. Therefore, in order to develop a sociological understanding of the reasons behind coworking, we must also situate coworking within broader debates on the relationship between entrepreneurship and society.

Imagined as a way of changing how we see the world (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006), entrepreneurship can be conceived of as a practice of a social, rather than strictly economic, nature (Daskalaki et al., 2015). There exists a body of work addressing the link between entrepreneurship and society, typically discussed in the context of social enterprise, which aims to legitimise forms of socially beneficial entrepreneurial activity (e.g. Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006; Steyaert and Hjorth, 2006). More recently, Hjorth (2013) has drawn attention to the broader social purpose of many contemporary initiatives, to find a common desire to transform the process of social change – not just society – which he defines as public entrepreneurship. Along these lines, Kauppinen and Daskalaki (2015) see entrepreneurship reimagined and re-enacted as a socially subversive desire to resist fixed, institutionally bound, individualistic, professional identities. Lindgren and Packendorff (2006) find such entrepreneurs draw on practices beyond their discipline, continually challenging themselves to change the way they work, to transform their socialities. The literature on public entrepreneurship provides examples of



collectives working through social, political and economic uncertainties, in search of alternative ways of working, dissociating themselves from established modes of organising, making new connections, occupying and repurposing workspaces (Daskalaki et al., 2015; Hjorth, 2013; Kokkinidis, 2015a; Martí and Fernandez, 2015). Here entrepreneurship, community and transformation are seen to play out together to construct representations of post-capitalist futures, typically in response to the 2007-8 Global Financial Crisis (Daskalaki et al., 2015; Kokkinidis, 2015a; Martí and Fernandez, 2015). These are deeply situated projects (Hjorth, 2013) that foster a sense of togetherness (Martí and Fernandez, 2015). Daskalaki (2017), for example, finds spontaneity and ephemerality in communities repurposing public spaces, while Kokkinidis (2015b) sees workers' collectives as promoting an ethic of care amongst members for the common good.

This is an evocative scene of social change and urban transformation that some, but not all, coworkers associate their spaces with (Brown, 2017; Merkel, 2015; Schmidt et al., 2014). For example, Author<sup>1</sup> identifies that two pioneering coworking spaces were founded to foster a sense of togetherness, albeit for different reasons. Whilst one space (Spiral Muse, in San Francisco) was designed for small group companionship, the other (The Hub, in London) brought together social entrepreneurs with a vision towards

building a movement for social change through a global network of ‘Hubs’ (Author1). Hence, while coworking is different from collectivism, these phenomena share a communal ethos that inspires rethinking and redefining the nature of work.

Coworking is situated at the confluence of significant global trends in flexible labour market conditions, urban transformation and economic instability that many contemporary workers need to come to terms with individually and collectively. Hence the reasons why individuals cowork are multiple and complex, but are concurrent with broader and deeper motivations to reimagine and reshape how work is organised to gain a sense of community and agency in an increasingly uncertain world.

### **Learning to Cowork**

For Merkel (2015), coworking is a constructive and highly social activity that promotes free exchanges of ideas underpinned by commonly held values of collaboration, openness, community, accessibility and sustainability. Schmidt et al. (2014) find coworking enables what they refer to as boundaryless work – testing ideas, alternative business models, new economic practices or flexible cooperative structures – through collaborative learning and exchange. They highlight a temporary spatial proximity between coworkers, which provides opportunities to combine knowledge from different

domains at particular times (Schmidt et al., 2014). However, as Parrino (2015) notes, social proximity alone is not sufficient to create the interactions and knowledge flows necessary for innovation; an organisational platform is required. What is also necessary, is for individuals to learn to participate in coworking. To facilitate this, coworking space providers employ space hosts to get to know individuals, identify mutual interests, organise social events, and provide introductions (Author2). This is commonly referred to as ‘curation’ of the community (Author2; Brown, 2017; Fuzi, 2015; Merkel, 2015; Parrino, 2015). Furthermore, Author2 shows how curation constructs a habitus commonly referred to by coworking protagonists as ‘co-creation’ through which members feel sufficiently empowered to take a lead in the curation process, collaboratively organising events and encounters that generate opportunities for mutual support and/or knowledge exchange. Hence coworking curation is a process through which coworkers gain enough of a sense of belonging (Garrett et al., 2017) to find their place in the community and begin to develop collective practices. Garrett et al. (2017) find collective identity work in coworking, which they conceptualise as community work – an unfolding process involving three stages of collective identity formation: endorsing each other, encountering community norms, and engaging in enacting its vision. Those who find they cannot subscribe to community norms are unlikely to remain – coworking is self-selecting.

The curation of learning to cowork can therefore be understood through the situated learning concept of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991). As Lave (1991) argues, communities of practice shape identities through a process that gives structure and meaning to knowledgeable skill. To become a full member of a community of practice requires participation in the technologies of everyday practices as well as social relations, production processes and activities (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The notion of legitimate peripheral participation refers to situations where new members of a community learn from existing members by first observing – and in this sense, being on a ‘periphery’ of practices – then, by practising themselves (Lave, 1991). Hence participation is not necessarily only about being involved in a meaningful way but also about learning what is acceptable, what is not, and how to navigate those (Handley et al., 2007). Curation enables new coworkers to gradually learn to participate in the collective everyday practices of coworking.

Learning to cowork can therefore be understood as a process through which individuals are invited to participate in collective everyday practices. This learning takes place through the socialities of coworking that are provided by legitimate peripheral participation within the coworking space, curated by the space hosts. Through the curation process, new coworkers learn to develop everyday collective practices.

Thus, whilst we can understand the curation of legitimate peripheral participation as the means through which to learn to cowork, this alone does not give insights into what is learned from coworking, and how. To do this, we must examine the everyday practices of coworking.

### **Coworking to Learn**

Descriptions of everyday practices in coworking are limited in the literature, but Merkel (2015) suggests that mastering the financial, organisational and social aspects of independent work occurs in parallel with occupational learning. Spinuzzi (2012) classifies the benefits of coworking as interaction, feedback, trust, learning, partnerships, encouragement, and referrals. Hence, whilst we know little about what coworkers actually do, they clearly derive value from social relations in coworking. When discussing learning, Spinuzzi (2012) refers to collectively solving work tasks, leveraging peers' talents. Through 'talent pooling' and knowledge sharing, coworkers gain efficiencies and may also learn new competencies through collaborative practices (Spinuzzi, 2012). Importantly, these relational practices are situated in and influenced by the spaces of coworking (Schmidt et al., 2014; Spinuzzi, 2012). Space shapes relational learning, and is thus a significant consideration (Blasco, 2016) for understanding learning from coworking.

Spinuzzi (2012) defines three types of coworking space: a community space, an ‘unoffice’ designed for work but with features not normally found at work, and federated work spaces, where formal collaboration is strongly encouraged. Gandini’s (2015) experiences of formal network building through coworking are indicative of federated work spaces, differing from Merkel’s (2015) more communal experiences. However, one of the ways in which Spinuzzi’s (2012) research provides insights into coworking is through the notion of the unoffice, which is neither office nor any other form of space, but it brings together elements of different spaces. Such spaces are also described by Author<sub>2</sub>, where desks and computers are located amongst a bricolage of bicycle racks, bookshelves, soft furnishings, games rooms, greenery and kitchen facilities. These spatial features contribute to coworking practices as alternatives to those in conventional office spaces. Learning from coworking happens as coworkers appropriate such unorthodox spaces through their practices.

In the management education context, Beyes and Michels (2011), Bureau and Komporozos-Athanasiou (2016), and Bissola et al. (2017) discuss students appropriating spaces outside the norms of business schools to deconstruct and contest the status quo. Students become attuned to how space unfolds to offer contradictions and transformative possibilities (Beyes and Michels, 2011). Without spatial constraints, students learn to

deconstruct and subvert fixed ideas and generate transdisciplinary collective knowledge (Bissola et al., 2017; Bureau and Komporozos-Athanasiou, 2016). Importantly, imagining such spaces as unorthodox invites challenge and playfulness to rethink and remake how we work (Bissola et al., 2017; Hjorth, 2005). To see space as filled with possibilities engenders appropriation, reappropriation or misappropriation of it (Beyes and Michels, 2011; De Certeau, 1998; Lefebvre, 2003; 2014; Hjorth, 2005).

Schmidt et al. (2014) suggest that the boundarylessness of coworking spaces also fosters learning and innovation. To understand how, it is important to explain what appropriation means in terms of the everyday practices in coworking spaces. Space is appropriated through everyday practices (De Certeau, 1998; Lefebvre, 2014). We presume the everyday to be mundane, familiar and unremarkable because it is routine, repetitive and rhythmic, but it can also be creative, adaptive and defiant (Scott, 2009). As Sheringham (2006: 300) argues: “The quotidien [sic] involves continuity but also change, repetition but also variation and evolution. It is made up of routines, but also major events .... It is universal ... but also variable .... It is independent of and marked by history”. Lefebvre (2014: 531) argues that “production produces man [sic]”, meaning that how we undertake everyday practices makes us who we are. Thus, practices become unconsciously manifest as social values, or habitus, through their ritualistic repetition (Sheringham, 2006).

De Certeau (1998) acknowledges that the quotidian is too often taken for granted, but shows how tactical contestations of routines and rituals can occur through individual attentiveness to practices. Practical everyday reappropriations of space can therefore produce alternative and unexpected ways of experiencing the everyday, which holds potential to transform those spaces, practices and the Self (De Certeau, 1998). Hence, examining everyday coworking practices can enable us to understand how coworkers learn to contest organisational orthodoxies, and thereby entrepreneurial norms, through their appropriations of unorthodox spaces.

In reviewing the literature, I have drawn on ideas beyond coworking in order to situate and conceptualise it as learning, and to discuss the reasons to cowork as multiple and complex but consistent with broader and deeper motivations to gain a sense of place within the contemporary entrepreneurial milieu. In relation to learning in the context of coworking, I identify a twofold process. I have drawn a distinction between *learning to cowork* – a process of legitimate peripheral participation through which coworkers learn the shared practices of a coworking space – and a process of *coworking to learn*, where coworking spaces are generative of and by everyday practices that invite rethinking and reshaping of how work is organised. Thus, I propose that coworking holds the potential to produce everyday practices that contest but do not confront entrepreneurial norms. In analysing the empirical findings of my research, I illustrate this twofold process and show



how its constituent practices are interrelated in that, while becoming a coworker is not the ultimate aim of coworking, it is necessary for the ability to learn to become entrepreneurially proficient. First, I explicate my research methods.

## Methods

### *Research context*

This study is based on my participation in coworking between January 2012 and April 2014, during which I regularly interacted with coworkers, coworking spaces, and staff. As a participant observer (Clifford, 2010; DeWalt and DeWalt, 2002), I became embedded (Mahadevan, 2011) in Hub Melbourne in Australia, which opened in March 2011 as a franchise of the global Hub network. For reasons of confidentiality, all participant and group names have been replaced with pseudonyms. However, coworking space names and locations are real.

My coworking experience at Hub Melbourne involved working independently, attending and arranging meetings, participating in and organising learning-related events, attending social events and participating in ad hoc discussions on a range of topics. I, like other members, coworked at varying frequencies, depending on other commitments. As a self-funded casual member, with a full-time academic position, I coworked up to

approximately two days per week. I also frequently attended out-of-hours events there, which were open to the public.

Hub Melbourne originally occupied part of the top floor of a heritage listed building next to Melbourne's major transport hub. Since opening, Hub Melbourne experienced several stages of renovation, expansion, membership turnover, rebranding and relocation. In its first iteration, Hub Melbourne was a space renovated by the founder and his friends to provide desks, wi-fi access, a meeting/event space, a kitchenette and toilet facilities via a small range of membership options. It was a franchise of the growing global network of Impact Hub coworking spaces. The Hub Melbourne space had a do-it-yourself feel and a vibrancy. It was filled with music, greenery and retro furnishings. An average day would begin quietly, but by mid-morning the space would be full. Members had diverse backgrounds – from artists to accountants. Casual membership was affordable at A\$30 per hour. At that time members were typically recent graduates who worked independently for at least part of their working week. We were strongly encouraged to make the space our own, and organise its everyday. There was conviviality and busy-ness – it had a distinctive vibe.

In March 2012, we moved into a larger space on the other side of the corridor that had been architecturally designed and professionally renovated to expand membership. The

community was involved in its co-creation, which included attending design meetings, reviewing plans and contributing to discussion fora. Features requested by members such as portable whiteboards, reconfigurable desks, spaces demarcated for quiet work, and an industrial-style kitchen were incorporated. This new ‘era’ was named ‘Hub 2.0’ (two-point-O).

Meanwhile, Hub Melbourne left the Impact Hub network to become the flagship site of a new network, Hub Australia, established by its founder. Occupancy of the space grew rapidly as staff rebranded it, increased its promotions, extended membership options, and offered new events. I observed a turnover of membership, with many early protagonists leaving but staying connected, as their own ventures grew or they changed jobs. My own participation at Hub Melbourne declined from December 2012 due to my changing job role. These first two iterations of Hub Melbourne provide much of my research data. Since 2013, Hub Melbourne transformed significantly before being relocated and rebranded in 2016.

Through Hub Melbourne connections, I gained access to other global coworking spaces and coworkers. I also coworked at Hub Islington, Hub Kings Cross, and Hub Westminster in July 2012, and discussed coworking with early protagonists of the phenomenon in Dallas in April 2014. These experiences provided comparison with my primary data

source, to understand similarities and differences between coworking contexts. Though I have coworked in other spaces, I do not use data from those sites in this study. See table 1 for the timeline of the research.

### *Research methodology*

This study is based on a longitudinal ethnography employing participant observation (Clifford, 2010; DeWalt and DeWalt, 2002). Throughout the research, I have sought to account for my entangled identity positions and my relationalities in the field of study by employing a reflexive hermeneutic approach (Cunliffe, 2011; Wagle and Cantaffa, 2008). As the study unfolded, I experienced unavoidable self-transformations (Clifford, 2010), and engaged in self-reflexivity within these (Tomkins and Eatough, 2010). As a coworker, I shared meanings and experiences with others to develop self and collective narratives. However, I accept Emerson et al.'s (1995) cautionary note that immersion is not merging. Throughout the research, I remained a researcher by staying attuned to the rhythms of coworking (Cunliffe, 2008) to identify when and how to withdraw and reflect on my observations and experiences.

### *Data collection*

I draw on handwritten fieldnotes made between January 2012 and April 2014. Those data include observations of coworking at Hub Melbourne during 2012, supplemented by

notes made when coworking at the three Hub spaces in London during July 2012.

Fieldnote data from discussions with coworkers in Dallas, Texas in April 2014 are also used. Fieldnote entries were recorded in the form of diary-style reflections and notes taken during discussions, events, and meetings. Table 1 represents the research timeline.

**Table 1. Research Timeline**

	Timeline of coworking participation <sup>1</sup>													
	2012												...	2014
Space	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	...	A
Hub Melbourne														
Hub Islington														
Hub Kings Cross														
Hub Westminster														
Dallas discussions														

1: Data captured between January 2013 – March 2014 are not included in this study.

### *Data analysis*

In preparation for analysis, I reviewed and transcribed all fieldnotes verbatim into a single electronic document, in chronological order, to enable coding and to reflexively recount the meanings I had given them at the time of writing, contrasting those with any new meanings I now ascribed them, as suggested by Emerson et al. (1995).

In that document, I reviewed data entries for correctness against my original notes, which also helped me identify preliminary themes. Based on the research questions, I coded the transcriptions to identify themes relating to: who coworkers were, why they coworked, and how and what they learned from coworking (see table 2). Those codes were combined with the a priori concepts (Emerson et al., 1995) discussed earlier, i.e. legitimate peripheral participation and everyday practices. Three key themes emerged: learning to become collaborative, learning to become intentional, and learning to perform contestation (see table 2, column 4). Below I discuss the findings, providing critical discussion of vignettes, moving between the themes and my theoretical framework to understand what and how learning occurs in coworking.

**Table 2. Research participants named in selected vignettes**

<i>Participant name and occupational identity</i>	<i>Why cowork</i>	<i>Coworking approach</i>	<i>What they learned</i>
Adrian: Futurist	Knowledge exchange	Knowledge provider	Contestation
Cecilia: Space manager; social entrepreneur	Facilitating; connecting	Connection maker	Intentionality

Christian: trend spotter	Connecting	Knowledge provider	Not known
Francis: space host	Facilitating	Connection maker	Collaboration
Josh: coworker; tech developer	Knowledge exchange; mutual support	Advocate; collaborator	Contestation
Juliette: salaried worker; coworker	Alternative to office	Casual member	Collaboration
Mark: connection catalyst; changemaker	Facilitating; connecting	Connection maker	Collaboration; intentionality
Michelle: events manager	Facilitating	Connection maker	Collaboration
Mike: coworker; tech developer	Knowledge exchange; mutual support	Advocate; collaborator	Contestation
Oliver: space provider	Facilitating	Advocate	Not known

Ryan: salaried and independent worker	Connecting; knowledge exchange	Connection maker; knowledge provider	Intentionality
Siobhan: author; coworking employee; independent worker	Knowledge exchange; facilitating	Connection maker	Not known
Steve: space provider	Facilitating	Advocate; Connection maker	Collaboration; intentionality

## Learning everyday coworking practices

### *Learning to become collaborative*

Unsurprisingly, collaboration is a key theme emerging from the data. Curation by space hosts is known to facilitate the community participation that underpins collaboration in coworking (Merkel, 2015; Brown, 2017). The empirical material shows an emphasis on participation: becoming what Hub Melbourne staff referred to as ‘member-driven’ through a process of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991), in



which curation is appropriated from the host by members and community practices are reproduced to create collaborations. I observed coworkers initiating participation in the everyday of the community, and did so myself. The extract below from a fieldnote enables insight into the notion of member-driven coworking:

I organise [the workshop], not them. There's this obligation that comes with membership – it is not simply enough to just join and use. You must/are expected to give back. Give to get. Is this something that has emerged/evolved/been strategically built in (pushed)? ...3 staff of 4 at Hub to help me organise [the] event: Mark – people; Michelle (Eventbrite); Francis (book [the] space).  
(Fieldnote: on organising a workshop, 29/4/12)

Many coworkers shared the sense of obligation I felt to participate in and 'give back' to the coworking community. At Hub Melbourne I observed this in various forms, for example, bringing in homemade cakes to share, or selecting the daily playlist streamed through the speaker system. My fieldnote reflects a desire to participate in the coworking quotidian, based on my observations of others' reciprocal practices. Similarly, Ferrary (2003) illustrates gift giving practices being important to constructing social exchanges in the entrepreneurial networks of Silicon Valley. Gift giving is a common human practice

that engenders not only reciprocity but circulation of the gift (Mauss, 1990). To give back in coworking is therefore an entrée into participating in its circulatory social relations.

Initially I participated mainly in mundane routines that benefited all, such as unloading the dishwasher and watering plants. Meanwhile, I observed and gradually joined others in participating in talent pooling (Spinuzzi, 2012) and knowledge exchange practices. Whilst I organised a workshop series, others collaboratively planned the weekly running club or organised the ‘Smarter Venture Club’ – a mutual support group for coworkers developing more sustainable business practices, which aimed to share knowledge and develop business skills. To do so, involved convening planning meetings around individual work tasks, scheduling events, and promoting them to others. These were direct ways of participating in the community, but they also provided opportunities to learn how to organise everyday events that nourished the community. Members who would previously have worked individually and independently would not otherwise have had such a range of opportunities for social exchange and collaboration with individuals from diverse occupational backgrounds if they did not cowork.

In organising the workshop series, I discovered staff support was ‘built in’, hence members were assisted by hosts getting involved in the organising practices of the community. For example, the Hub Melbourne host organised a weekly ‘mixed bag’ lunch

event, in which individuals would each bring ingredients to prepare together and share. During these convivial events, coworkers chatted and announcements were made about individual achievements and upcoming events. Connections were made.

Scheduled to occur immediately after an ‘open house’ event, through which potential new coworkers would receive a guided tour of the space, the lunch gave structure and routine to networking opportunities through participation in food preparation, dialogue and announcements. Mixed bag lunches demonstrate how meaningful such everyday practices are in coworking and so were planned to symbolise the communal ethos to newcomers and forge new connections. Over time the event became member-driven, as the practices of organising it were appropriated by particular members. This was encouraged by the host.

The space provider reinforced such appropriations of organisation by members, framing coworking with reference to notions of ‘community’ and ‘connecting’ when speaking to the coworkers:

‘Coworking is a community, not just a space; a cluster is just a space. Don’t build a silo. ...Where members become the host; the space as connector.’ (Fieldnote:

Steve, space provider, speaking at Hub Melbourne Town Hall meeting, 17/5/2012)

Steve directed coworkers' attention to the interplay between the social and the spatial in co-constructing his notion of community. As the first 'town hall' meeting since expansion to 'Hub 2.0', this was a platform for open dialogue with him, and an opportunity for co-creation, which would inform Hub Melbourne strategy. It was also an opportunity to reinforce his message about the Hub becoming member-driven, which he saw as critical to managing membership expansion and sustaining the communal ethos.

The space provider's openness to member appropriations of the space enabled everyday coworking practices to flourish, which gave meaning to participation and engendered collaboration. In this way, curation provided the organisational platform (Parrino, 2015) necessary to engender collaboration. The curation of a member-driven coworking community can therefore be seen as a process of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Coworkers were invited to participate in the everyday social exchanges of coworking by observing the routines and rituals instituted by their peers, not the organisation. Hence, coworkers' appropriation (De Certeau, 1998) of the curation process was generative of the everyday collective practices of coworking. As practices developed, collaborations were formed.

### *Learning to become intentional*

As shown above, coworkers participated in shared practices that did not explicitly relate to their own work, but gave meaning to coworking and enabled them to *learn to cowork*. It is therefore also important to understand what and how coworkers intended to learn from participating in shared everyday coworking practices. Intentionality is a second key theme emerging from the data. In cognitive psychology research, intentionality is understood to be determined by beliefs and attitudes, and consequently to determine behaviours (Boyd and Vozikis, 1994). It has been researched to understand how individuals learn to become entrepreneurial (Co and Cooper, 2013; Piperopoulos and Dimov, 2015), and is therefore directly relevant to understanding learning from coworking. The following fieldnote shows how intentions to collaborate in coworking spaces emerge, which might not occur in other situations:

My day: ...I met Juliette and talked about the project we were doing together. I then met Mark and talked about another project. ...I dropped in on Steve and Mark to pitch ideas from previous notes while at conference. I then went through the conference info [sic] I'd accumulated and my jottings to trace themes/ideas/references to follow up on. ...I do a lot of discrete but joined up tasks there. (Fieldnote: on a typical day coworking, 16/4/12)

My day was focused on knowledge sharing. Seeing Juliette in the space, I took the opportunity to convene an ad hoc meeting with her, which she was open to. Likewise, Steve and Mark did not mind me interrupting them when I noticed a rare moment when they were together. Such open attitudes to spontaneity and ‘dropping in on’ discussions were outcomes of the beliefs engendered through the curation process, which Steve referred to as ‘giving permission’.

Not all coworkers welcomed interruption, but they found ways to communicate this, such as wearing headphones whilst working. However, coworking invites an intentionality to connect, through its curated routines and rituals. I coworked infrequently, and so I intended to use my time in a way that would allow me to keep projects associated with the community on track.

Other coworkers adopted different everyday tactics, which exhibited more entrepreneurial intentions. Though I primarily coworked at Hub Melbourne, I also did so at other locations. In London, I coworked in three Hubs located there, and had opportunities to meet hosts and other staff, following introductions by Hub Melbourne staff. Discussions with Hub staff revealed that their contracts enabled them to work flexibly, blending work on their own ventures, not directly associated with their Hub job

roles, into their daily work routines. Cecilia, the host/space manager at Hub Kings Cross discussed her intentionality behind simultaneously working for the organisation and herself:

I walked to [Hub Kings Cross from Hub Islington] with Cecilia, its new space manager and she ... is very focused on social enterprise. She began at Hub Sao Paulo and believes small business is better than big. Doing the host job will give her time to consider her social enterprise. (Fieldnote extract: Hub Islington and Hub Kings Cross, 5/7/12).

Cecilia, like other employees of the Hub network worked flexibly across and within spaces. Firstly, Cecilia had relocated from the Sao Paulo Hub to London; secondly, her position at Hub Kings Cross enabled her to connect with and get to know many members as she curated their community participations. The combination of her tactical movement across spaces and situation within one space created opportunities for knowledge acquisition that could inform her new venture. Cecilia intentionally connected with other coworkers to not only support them but to learn how she might benefit from their skills and knowledge, to build her social enterprise. She tactically situated herself in the coworking milieu to develop her entrepreneurial intentions.

Such fluid working arrangements provide valuable learning opportunities. Similarly, I had previously met and coworked with Ryan at Hub Melbourne. Ryan's working arrangements were perhaps more complex than Cecilia's, and yet he was able to make sense of working both for a multinational and on his own ventures whilst situating himself in coworking spaces:

[We] need to engage with big institutions to get stuff done – small = agility/autonomy; big = authority /legitimacy – working together blends the two.

He only worked 3 days / week at [Company X] so he had time to focus on other things. For him it's not about working against the institutions but within them.

(Fieldnote: coffee with Ryan, salaried worker and independent worker, 18/12/12)

Ryan was, at that time, employed by a multinational corporation. He chose not to work full-time. His separate entrepreneurial work included a variety of small-scale, simultaneous, independent projects in the tech sector. Ryan understood the benefits of moving between his salaried position and his projects. He was highly mobile and used various coworking spaces globally, creating many opportunities for knowledge exchange and learning. In doing so, he became a valuable connector and a source of knowledge for his employer, his coworking peers, and others in his network. Rather than respond to ad hoc opportunities, as I did, Ryan coworked with intentions to be 'agile' and 'autonomous'



whilst understanding that he brought with him ‘authority’ and ‘legitimacy’ into coworking. His intentionality built the capacity of his network, not just his own reputation. He understood the value of his mobility.

Interestingly, the employment situations of Cecilia and Ryan, whereby they combine salaried work with independent entrepreneurial activity is illustrative of an increasingly common trend that Neff (2012) identifies in the tech sector, whereby employers enable individual employees to invest in constructing their own career opportunities, with the prospect that it may pay off for both parties in the future. Yet the associated risks are borne by the individuals (Neff, 2012), which may suggest why Cecilia and Ryan adopt tactical everyday practices to intentionally create coworking connections. Hence, where Ryan and Cecilia tactically situated their coworking practices, they fostered connections that could support them in coping with current or future uncertainty.

Critically, such intentionality might be seen to be individualistic and in tension with the communal ethos of coworking. However, learning to become entrepreneurially proficient is increasingly understood as a collective venture (Alvarez and Barney, 2007; Daskalaki et al., 2015). Farias (2017) shows how friendship bonds are intentionally constructed in, for example, Kibbutzim to create the internal economies necessary to sustain communities. Hence, if coworkers learn through community curation that entrepreneurial

intentionality is a core value of the community, as in the Impact Hub network, it becomes an accepted feature of everyday coworking practices.

### *Learning to perform contestation*

Contestation emerged as a third key theme in the data. I observed that shared intentions to learn how to rethink and reshape organisational practices were often enacted in coworking. Coworkers would make deliberate efforts to appear to be contesting orthodoxy, as if engaging in identity work to portray coworking practices as unorthodox. My meeting with Josh and Mike was indicative of this:

‘[Coworking is n]ot a real estate business but just a place to cultivate ideas and make things happen; [a] creative space.’ ... ‘...Rules are there to be challenged. ...Risk receptors – [these are] more the further we are away from the centre.’  
(Fieldnote: meeting Josh and Mike in Dallas, 25/4/2014)

Josh and Mike are independent entrepreneurs in the tech sector, and former coworking space providers who continued to cowork in different spaces in Dallas and in other cities. Having been early coworking protagonists, they saw it as an everyday practice of cultivating ideas and making things happen. Their space was one of the first recognised

coworking spaces in the mid-2000s, which they operated as recent graduates, sub-letting to friends and associates. This they juxtaposed against a recent commodification of the coworking concept as a commercial real estate business model that Author<sub>1</sub> identifies. They explained that they had not sought to profit from their space, but to merely have enough members to cover its costs, supporting each other on their projects.

Unlike Ryan, who expressed the need to work with institutions (but adapting their norms to suit his objectives), Josh and Mike discussed contesting them. They viewed themselves as outsiders, having built their independent careers to date through coworking without institutional support. Nevertheless, they also spoke of their ‘risk receptors’ being heightened ‘the further [they] are away from the centre’. I interpreted this to mean that although their dispositions were outside of institutions, they remained close enough to mitigate uncertainty. As Ryan pointed out, the benefits of working closely with institutions include gaining individual legitimacy. Josh and Mike seemingly enjoyed the agility and autonomies of being ‘on the outside’, but had learned the need to legitimise their work by maintaining close connections to those that commissioned it. Yet, in discussing risk, Josh and Mike revealed that they experienced the uncertainties of entrepreneurship. Working from project to project, whilst appearing to contest the status quo was a tenuous position to be in. Cecilia and Ryan, on the other hand, did not allude

to the same uncertainties, possibly because they had learned tactics of interweaving entrepreneurial work with salaried positions.

At Hub Melbourne I participated in several seminars and workshops that explicitly facilitated learning. Outside of working hours, the space would be temporarily reappropriated and reconfigured to deliver events in which to learn entrepreneurial competencies or approaches to wellbeing. There were also various events that sought to provoke contestations of norms by introducing trans-disciplinary ideas. The fieldnote below comes from such an event at Hub Melbourne convened by one of its members:

‘[The s]cope, scale, speed of change is growing: urbanisation, exponential population growth. Our expectations are out of whack with what’s actually happening. Over-fishing makes the eco system ‘wobble’ and destabilises it to eliminate it. Fish and oil will become exclusive to just the wealthy – so nothing will remain the same. ...Be advocates – systemic change won’t create carbon zero cites. So change the cities.’ (Fieldnote: CollabMelb event at Hub Melbourne, speaker: Adrian, Futurist, 10/1/12)

Adrian made his environmental provocations to motivate potential ‘changemakers’. Notably, change and social enterprise were core themes of the Hub network. Hub

Melbourne's early slogans included 'where change goes to work', and 'innovation through collaboration'. Innovation for social change was an explicit intent of many members that fuelled participation in ad hoc in-depth discussions outside of working hours. For many, the idea of changemaking became interwoven in their everyday practices. Unorthodox discourses of changemaking, drawing on radical theories, produced ideas around whiteboards, over after-work drinks and through social media to co-create new ventures that pooled existing talents with newfound knowledge.

Coworkers had permission to reappropriate the space to run their own events, which supported a variety of creative activities, including those of members who sought to establish themselves as changemakers through public speaking and consultancy. Exchanging ideas with peers gave individuals a confidence to practise their new contestational occupational identities. Members' public events at Hub Melbourne were typically designed as co-creation events to address local and global issues, they attracted coworkers and non-coworkers, and promised sufficient potential for learning to warrant an entry fee for non-members. Audience participation provided the novice changemakers with moral support and a sense of belief in their capabilities – a self-efficacy (Boyd and Vozikis, 1994). Hence those social learning events were a means for mobilising coworkers' performances of entrepreneurialism.

Despite some coworkers, but not all, performing entrepreneurial identities, the everyday of learning to become entrepreneurially proficient and the associated uncertainties were apparent, but rarely discussed. However, one event I participated in during my visit to Hub Islington, that focused on exploring the future of work, offered insight into how coworkers were learning to navigate the uncertainties of contemporary labour market conditions:

‘Jobless growth is a real threat’ (Oliver, space provider). ...5 trends driving workplace change [were discussed] (Christian, Trend spotter). [We need] business with balance. ...[and] digital wellbeing (Siobhan, Author, coworking space employee and independent worker). (Fieldnote: various comments from speakers at ‘Re-work: Imagining the future of work’ event, Hub Islington, 5/7/12)

Here the panellists showed awareness of the need to rethink how we work (Christian) in response to socioeconomic uncertainty (Oliver). Many coworkers understood the threat of joblessness, because they themselves were without salaried employment. Siobhan’s comments allude to the pressures of such uncertainty. She aligned her notion of ‘business with balance’ to the popular ideal of work-life balance, recognising how intentions to become entrepreneurially proficient are entangled with unsettled senses of Self. Siobhan’s ‘digital wellbeing’ idea was her response to that problem. Through social

media, Siobhan saw opportunities to offer wellbeing support to coworkers. At Hub Melbourne, members also offered wellbeing-focused events, meditation sessions and yoga classes.

Whilst some coworkers learned to construct new, contestational occupational identities, many found the uncertainties of independent work confronting. To them, coworking was a means to learn the everyday entrepreneurial practices through which to navigate the tension between a common collective intent to contest entrepreneurial norms, and being confronted by a sense of unfixedness and precarity that underlie those everyday practices.

The empirical findings have drawn out the everyday practices of a complex situated learning process in coworking. The remainder of this article will distil why, what and how coworkers learn, and specify the theoretical and empirical contributions of this research, and what implications these have for our understanding of learning in coworking and the importance of everyday practice in the context of learning. I will then conclude by critically discussing the tensions identified to develop propositions for further inquiry.

## **Discussion**

This research offers theoretical and empirical insights into why, what and how learning occurs in coworking. Coworkers learn to develop collective everyday practices to work within the uncertainties of their working conditions, gaining support and developing agency by co-constructing a sense of community.

Theoretically, this research provides an understanding of why individuals cowork, as well as a conceptualisation of what and how coworkers learn. To address the first research question, ‘why cowork?’, the reasons to cowork are complex and motivated by a common need to learn how to construct independent entrepreneurial careers in evermore precarious circumstances. Hence, alternative collective ways of working are increasingly sought (Daskalaki et al., 2015). Coworking provides space in which to make sense of and co-construct a meaningful place in the entrepreneurial milieu.

Addressing the second research question, ‘what and how do individuals learn through coworking?’, learning in coworking is conceptualised as a twofold situated learning process of *learning to cowork* and *coworking to learn*. *Learning to cowork* is a curated process of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991), that is generative of shared everyday routines and rituals in coworking, as coworkers gradually appropriate the role of hosts, the community learns to become increasingly collaborative. Experienced as unorthodox and creative rather than mundane and routine, coworkers’ everyday practices in turn enable *coworking to learn*, whereby coworkers tactically appropriate



coworking spaces and reappropriate practices to contest entrepreneurial norms (De Certeau, 1988) through their newly developed ways of organising collectively. Conceptually, coworking provides a means for learning to become entrepreneurially proficient that is grounded in the everyday, is necessary to create new and innovative occupational practices, and is otherwise not provided.

Empirically, this study illustrates what coworkers learn in coworking spaces, and how they learn, thereby further addressing the second research question. In particular, the analysis identifies that coworkers learn to become collaborative, to become intentional, and to perform contestation. By learning to cowork they first learn to develop and establish everyday practices that curate a sense of community (Brown, 2017; Merkel, 2015). This process of legitimate peripheral participation enables coworkers to become attuned to the milieu of coworking. In doing so, coworkers *learn to become collaborative*. These collaborative practices hold potential to support *learning to become intentional*. Importantly, this particular learning is determined both by whether individuals intend to become entrepreneurially proficient, and to what extent the community ‘gives permission’ to entrepreneurial intentionality (Boyd and Vozikis, 1994). With permission, coworkers tactically position themselves to make connections that hold potential to benefit themselves and the community. Further, coworkers appropriate their coworking spaces to create opportunities for *learning to perform contestation* – learning how to

develop practices that contest entrepreneurial orthodoxies to influence change. By co-constructing coworking as an unorthodox situation from which to contest entrepreneurial norms, coworkers are able to forge new occupational identities.

To address the third research question, ‘what implications does this have for our understanding of learning in coworking, and for the broader appreciation of the importance of everyday practice in the context of learning?’, this research has implications for our understanding of learning in coworking, and for the broader appreciation of the importance of everyday practices in the context of learning.

This research provides three contributions. Firstly, this study theoretically and empirically contributes to our understanding of learning in coworking by illustrating the previously under-explored process through which it occurs, and the everyday practices it produces. Whilst coworking spaces have been analysed (e.g. Garrett et al., 2017; Merkel, 2015; Spinuzzi, 2012), their learning process and everyday practices were not previously well understood.

Secondly, this study contributes empirically to the emergent body of knowledge on the convergence of entrepreneurialism, collectives and social change (e.g. Daskalaki et al., 2015; Daskalaki, 2017; Kokkinidis, 2015b; Hjorth, 2013). This research shows how coworking produces similar organisational practices with related social aims, and

therefore offers a new site for research into the everyday practices of collective learning and organisation. Learning to become collaborative, to become intentional and to perform contestation do not obviously come to mind as aspects of learning. By drawing attention to why coworkers learn these everyday practices, and how this learning occurs in coworking, the study has shown that they are complex but necessary for coworkers to situate themselves in the entrepreneurial milieu and work within current socioeconomic uncertainties.

This is not to say that the everyday of other organisational spaces do not enable learning of these and other practices, but that these are not explicitly discussed as learning. Hence, this research is not only relevant to gaining an appreciation of why individuals cowork, what they learn and how, but it also encourages a rethinking of our understanding of what learning is and what individuals need to learn to navigate a world of work increasingly characterised by uncertainty.

The third contribution of this study is that coworking does not just provide a new site of learning, but also insight into what and how individuals learn to necessarily become entrepreneurially proficient. Hence, this research theoretically and empirically enriches the body of knowledge on learning that draws attention to learning possibilities beyond business schools and orthodox forms of management learning (e.g. Beyes and Michels,

2011; Bissola et al., 2017; Bureau and Komporozos-Athanasiou, 2016) by exploring the potential for everyday learning that is situated in unorthodox spaces.

This study therefore has practical implications for understanding not only coworking but also other sites of everyday collective learning. As socioeconomic conditions become less certain and occupations become more precarious, individuals must learn to adapt and (re)establish a sense of purpose. It is imperative that researchers and policymakers understand and enable emerging forms of collective learning to provide the support individuals to develop the flexible, mobile and adaptive occupational identities necessary to create and sustain opportunities to work.

### **Concluding remarks**

Critically, further to the contributions of this study, the research findings draw out two tensions that are indicative of this complex learning situation. Firstly, the notion of entrepreneurial intentionality (Boyd and Vozikis, 1994) might be seen to be in tension with the shared values in coworking. However, if intentionality is a core community value, it can construct an internal economy of exchange that sustains the community (Farias, 2017). The entrepreneurial intentionality found in this research illustrates how entrepreneurship is increasing reconceptualised as a collective rather than individual

venture, with a broader social purpose (Daskalaki et al., 2015; Kokkinidis, 2015b; Hjorth, 2013). Hence, in support of the second contribution, this research shows that coworking is a key site in which to learn how to develop more collective, less individualistic entrepreneurial everyday practices that benefit community and society.

The second tension identified in the findings is between performing entrepreneurial intentions to contest entrepreneurial norms and the lived experiences of uncertainty and precarity that characterise such an identity position. The intentionality that some coworkers present may mask their lived everyday experiences. Indeed, not all coworkers present themselves as intentional and this study focuses on learning practices observed in specific spaces, but it is acknowledged that other practices may emerge in other spaces. However, precarity is a widespread condition for many professionals, and is experienced by individuals in occupations previously considered secure (Loacker and Śliwa, 2016). Further to the third contribution, this study illustrates how individuals engage in coworking to learn how to cope with uncertainty by participating in shared everyday coworking practices that provide support for wellbeing. Kokkinidis (2015b) finds an ethic of care to underpin the ethos of collectives working through socioeconomic uncertainty. Coworking, as key site of entrepreneurial learning, can therefore also be considered as a space in which to learn an ethic of care for Self and society.

Considering these two tensions of Selfhood, I propose further research into the sites and practices of contemporary occupational learning to understand how career trajectories are being reimagined, re-enacted, and reproduced as collective endeavours. By drawing attention to situated learning processes in coworking, this study invites further empirical investigation into the appropriations of space to produce new and alternative sites of learning, and the communalities that emerge. This research therefore also opens up the theoretical question of whether coworking is a community of practice, and whether or not it is a unitary phenomenon or one that is diversifying into different organisational forms to adapt to particular urban contexts and socioeconomic conditions. Indeed, coworking is a contested terrain. This study points to entrepreneurial and social ideals being conflated to construct distinctive ‘changemaker’ careers in neoliberal economies. Critically, it must be asked what role(s) coworking plays in the current political economy, and whether its entrepreneurial practices are delivering social change, or whether it is becoming a new entrepreneurial hegemony over the social.

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