Consuming metaphors: Stimulating questions for everyday learning

DONNA ROONEY
University of Technology, Sydney, Australia (donna.rooney@uts.edu.au)

NICKY SOLOMON
City University, London, UK (nicky.solomon.1@city.ac.uk)

Abstract

This paper about consumption as a metaphor for learning follows from some ideas about learning and space that emerged from a research project concerned with everyday learning at work. These learning/work spaces have drawn our attention to the significant consumption (eating and drinking) occurring within them. We suggest that linking everyday learning to the ordinariness of consuming opens up some interesting questions about everyday learning in the workplace. Furthermore, we believe this metaphor can be put to work from a range of theoretical perspectives, and in this paper we begin to explore how these perspectives might be mobilised in order to produce new understandings. In all, this paper offers a playful hors d'oeuvre, to stimulate further selection from a veritable smorgasbord, and one to satisfy a range of possible theoretical tastes.

Keywords

metaphor, learning, consumption

Introduction

To begin our introductions we first offer a warning: *consumer beware!* If you consume this text intending to fulfil your hunger then you will sadly disappointed. We offer this paper as an interesting hors d'oeuvre for fruitful discussion. Our peripatetic wanderings draw from diverse theoretical resources in order to augment and extend conceptual understandings of everyday learning and of the use of metaphor.

Taking the ideas of learning spaces, and an association between consuming and learning, this paper plays with the notion of "consumption" as a metaphor for learning, and in particular, everyday learning at work. In recent educational commentary, the "consumption" metaphor has been instrumental in drawing necessary attention to

global market forces, Hayekian-like projects, marketisation, educational "products" and postmodern identities (Marginson, 1997). However, while consumption is our metaphor for learning, we understand consumption here in its more colloquial or garden-variety sense: that is, acts of ingesting food and beverage or, in other words, eating and drinking. This eating and drinking version of consumption is more (dare we say) palatable than the more uncomfortable ideas of consumption that connect to the commodification of knowledge and learners as consumers as produced within economic discourses that are in circulation.

Our purpose in drawing attention to the potential of this "consumption" metaphor is threefold. First, as a metaphor it serves to whet the appetite and stimulate future engagement with consuming/learning. The use of metaphor as a means for knowledge production is not new, and persuasive metaphors are features of many educational stories (Edwards *et al*., 2004; Hager, 2004; Sfard, 1998). Transference, competencies, construction, acquisition, and so on, are all prevalent in research as well as in the storylines underpinning organisational policy and teaching and learning practices. Yet, metaphors for informal learning (or everyday learning as we are calling it here) are not so readily spoken about – although this lack of talk is not to be conflated with its absence. But at a moment where interest in everyday learning is gaining momentum among researchers and managers, it seems timely to draw attention to metaphors for learning, and everyday learning in particular. These metaphors can shape, prompt and produce particular meanings. Here, we are interested in what this version of consumption illuminates, shapes, prompts and produces.

A related second purpose is to explore what new questions might be asked about everyday learning when employing a consuming/learning metaphor. Our sapid quest to raise new questions and produce new ways of understanding learning at work through metaphor is supported by those who argue for understandings produced through multiple visions (Easterby-Smith, Snell and Gherardi, 1998; Morgan, 1997; Sfard, 1988). It is not meant to suggest a subordination of other metaphors in preference of "consumption." What we are interested in is what thinking about learning as consumption might *also* contribute to what is known about everyday learning. In particular, a consumption metaphor triggers epistemological questions around what is being consumed. If "food" is one answer, then this metaphor also triggers questions about the production of food/knowledge and, in doing so, troubles consumption/production binaries.

A third purpose for producing this paper is more to do with the simple pleasure of the engagement itself. While we might have excluded this confession altogether, we believe that the significant pleasure of our engagement warrants some discussion. Therefore, before turning to our "main" offering, we begin by briefly discussing this pleasure. In doing so, we suggest that this eating and drinking metaphor can not only provide some humour but can also view learning as pleasurable and embodied, rather than as an act of the mind. This sits comfortably with McWilliam and Jones' (1996) view of learning as a "love affair."

This, our degustation of consuming/learning, has had its appeal. It has proven (for us) to be a most pleasurable engagement. This pleasure has not been limited to the authors, but many of our colleagues, who, on overhearing our food/learning conversations, were compelled to contribute. Perhaps this begins to suggest where the appeal for this metaphor lies: the ordinariness of eating and drinking coupled with the everydayness of learning. Thus this is a metaphor which makes the banal interesting. It

seems that the pleasure, productivity and necessity of consuming and learning is something in which we can all partake, and we do so continually throughout our lives.

Consuming and learning have a long association. Indeed babies' first task is to "learn" to suck, and as diets become more complex, so too does the learning required to survive contemporary society. Once formal education begins the responsibility as gatekeeper of consumption shifts from parent to State or workplace, where citizens and workers are fed "appropriate" diets. There are differences between food that is considered "good for you" and that which is considered to be "junk food." Somewhere between the regulated suckling of infants and adulthood enters fast food and "fast facts" or even "fast capitalism" (Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996). Consumption appears symptomatic of the pressures of contemporary life: "successive morsels consumed in a random succession, each time improvised anew according to the needs of the moment" (Bauman, 2005, p. 316). Again the epistemological promise of exploring consuming/learning becomes evident!

As women we have learned much about ourselves in the kitchen (Meyers, 2001), just as women of colour have used food and food preparation to understand identity (Davis, 1999). And while our mothers might have told us *not* to play with our food, Lyotard puts out a more appealing challenge, and that is to play with our knowledges (1984). It is such play that we attempt here as a humble entrée to further productions. This metaphor, and its promise for delectable discussions, disrupts bounded discourses. Its delight is more to do with a multiplicity and blending of flavours and textures, rather than bland reverence for one alone.

Preparing the space

The impetus for this paper comes from a three-year Australian Research Council-funded project which has explored everyday learning of a large public sector organisation involved in vocational education and training. In this organisation, like many other organisations, much time and effort is spent developing and providing learning initiatives with a view to better productivity.

Our research aimed to explore the significance of everyday learning for this organisation and its employees. We researched four work groups across two colleges: a group of work-based learning teachers who worked in the commercial arm of a college engaging in entrepreneurial activities, a group of clerical and administration workers in the Human Resources Unit, a group of trade teachers, and a group of strategic planners. The purpose of the study was to assist the organisation to develop strategies that would contribute to the learning of the employees and, at the same time, improve the productivity of their work and the productivity of the organisation itself. The intention was to "uncover" existing everyday learning practices and strategically to take them up so that more learning would take place. Over a two-year period observations were made, interviews conducted and meetings held with the overall goal of examining and describing informal learning in the workplace and considering the implications of this in light of enhancing learning in the workplace. The view of learning informing the research was one that foregrounded the interdependence of working, changing and learning and one that is deeply implicated in cultural practices (Billet, 2004; Billet, Smith and Barker, 2005). Our approach has been primarily discursive so that we have had extensive conversations with workers from four workgroups about their work and their learning.

An aspect occupying (some of) our thoughts of late was "space." With the benefit of a spatial lens, and drawing from various theorists (for example, Bhabha, 1994; Latour, 1986), we suggested that people within this organisation are learning in various spaces we have labelled 'in-between' or 'hybrid' spaces (Solomon, Boud and Rooney, 2005). These spaces are not simply work *or* social spaces, yet they are also both work *and* social spaces. We argued that traditional understandings of these spaces (like on-the-job and off-the-job), which are endowed with binaries, are no longer useful in thinking about everyday learning – as a participant suggests, "…we tend to work through lunch."

Physical spaces first caught our attention. We noticed the physicality of the spaces into which we were inserted as researchers. We mused over a shift toward the end of the project that saw participants welcome us first into their offices and classrooms, and then later to their tearooms and favourite cafés; and we mused over the meaning of these spatial shifts. With our spatial lens we revisited the project data and "discovered" that space had been there all along:

> *Well it's like we had someone talking to us from industry at lunchtime – it was pretty much an informal thing just over the lunchroom we had a guy out from industry and he was talking to us about different changes, quite often we have stuff like that where someone from industry comes out and talks to us and we find out new ways of doing things.*

There is little doubt that these workers, who had found "new ways of doing things," were learning in these spaces. Indeed, in our data we "discovered" many references to everyday learning also included ideas about spaces. Some were physical spaces like lunchrooms and cafés, and some were temporal, meal breaks and pauses in sanctioned work for example. Of course not all our data was so obviously pointing towards space, but what was triggered our imagination and supported a desire to look again.

In the processes of "looking again," we also noticed "consumption": not the type of consumption presented in the marketisation and commodification of education literature but, as earlier indicated, a more everyday consumption, that is understood as eating and drinking. What we now find interesting is how often consuming and learning are juxtaposed in these deceptively banal and typically overlooked spaces of everyday learning:

> *Well as I said earlier we all talk to each other in this section usually in the lunchroom so if there is anything we need to find out the head teacher will raise it with us – he is fairly informal but he always finds out lots of information around the college and he is very good socially he goes to many meetings and he sits on many committees so he lets us know what is happening.*

In our data there are comments about "critical teas" where "Who wants tea?" is code for "There's a problem", and the workers negotiate potential solutions over the teapot. Another example from our data of space, learning and consumption is a manager's discussion about the "morning teas" she employs with the purpose of facilitating cooperation among various groups in her unit. However, not all the consuming spaces were tearooms either. For example one worker used a local café as a site for potentially volatile negotiations with co-workers. Yet another example was a discussion about a professional development activity where, for one worker, the most promising learning occurred throughout the meal break where the participant said she, "networked furiously." Indeed, in this example, the participant saw the lunch break as the most

valuable aspect of the day's activity. In all, these examples of "space" and "food" and "learning" from our interview data offer "food for thought."

The significant presence of eating and drinking adds flavour to what is already understood about everyday learning. If everyday learning takes place alongside other activities, then why not eating as the accompaniment? Acts of eating to blur the nexus of orthodox social and work activities? Simultaneous acts of negotiating stories and sandwiches? These are interesting questions that potentially open up understandings about language at work, by encouraging a consideration of the demarcation of these consuming/learning spaces. First, who can enter these spaces? But then, who can consume/learn there? These are complex spaces, as illustrated in the examples above, which demonstrate that social processes of sharing food align with sharing stories and co-producing workplace knowledges.

Tasty metaphors

In the introduction we drew attention to the dark side of a "consumption" metaphor, where in some educational critiques of the knowledge economy the "consumption" metaphor foregrounds the marketisation and commodification of education. Here learners are understood to be consumers of knowledge rather than active producers of knowledge. As this is an uncomfortable metaphor for many educators, we acknowledge the danger of giving the same lexicon a "positive spin." Yet, at the same time we suggest it might be interesting to read the less palatable "consumption" in different ways. Indeed we are not the first to do so. Other writers, like us, challenge the idea that consumption is in binary opposition to production. For example du Gay (1996) argues for an understanding that complicates the relationships between consumers and producers: "Rather than viewing consumer behaviour as the simple expression of the will of capital…consumption…can be conceived of as a productive activity – a *poiesis* – which does not leave the subject, object or 'system' untouched." (p. 86). This notion of consumption is also evident in the writing of Lury (1996), who theorises the multiple cycles of production and consumption and the relations of power that work within these. While we might need to locate this view within the marketisation and commodification of education as the state removes its financial "stake" in education, Lury argues that "consumption is always a cultural as well as an economic process" and that "consumption, or demand, cannot be taken for granted but is itself a socially organized set of practices" (1996, p. 45). This reminder that social and cultural dimensions of learning are not lost provides a tasty opening for us.

As indicated in the introduction, various other metaphors have also been used to explore contemporary ideas about education and learning. Some of these include "acquisition" (Colley, Hodkinson and Malcom, 2003); "participation" (Lave and Wenger, 1991); "pathway" (McIntyre and Kimberley, 1998); "construction" (Hager, 2004) and "journey" metaphors (Wenger, 1998). These offer value in drawing attention to particular aspects of education and/or learning. The idea of acquisition, for example, draws attention to possessive knowledge, participation metaphors can feature the social processes of learning, and pathway and journey metaphors can draw attention to progression. Each of these produces useful insights in some regard, but not without limitations.

While the examples demonstrate how understandings are aided by the use of metaphor, it is also important to consider their limitations. The attention paid to knowledge

acquired, the social processes *participated* in, the pathways *progressed* and the journeys *travelled* sideline other important ideas. Texts that invest in learning as acquisition, for example, typically fall short of epistemological critique. Similarly, texts that present learning as participation can ignore important socio-political critique, just as pathway and journey metaphors privilege linearity and idealised progression without paying attention to utopian destinations. Similarly, a limitation of texts that present *other* "consumption" metaphors is that while they say much about educational institutions and government they generally have little to say about everyday learning. As Morgan (1997) points out, metaphors are also, "a way of *not* seeing" (p. 5, emphasis in original). In short, any metaphoric lens that produces particular knowledge will also be distorted, biased, incomplete and potentially misleading (ibid., p. 5). To counter this metaphoric myopia, some concede the limitations of a single metaphoric lens and opt instead for the multiple vision provided by employing more than one metaphor (Morgan, 1997; Sfard, 1988).

A promising metaphor

While consumption is the metaphor we advocate here, we acknowledge that some may simply see it as another way of saying "acquisition" – but we think it is more than that. While both acquisition and consumption metaphors "take something in," an important difference is that consumption does something besides – consuming also draws attention to what the act enables (Bauman, 2005). One consumes for energy, for pleasure, for fulfilment, for… One eats, one grows (as might one's girth). We eat to live! Living is hardly possible without consumption. Lifelong consuming? Moreover, coupled with the ideas around space, this metaphor draws attention to the social act of *consuming*, and particularly so in regard to everyday learning at work.

Another interesting (and important) aspect of consumption is the epistemological questions it triggers. If consumption is our metaphor, then what of foodstuffs: *knowledge* as *food*? This idea is useful because it draws attention to the selection and preparation, as well as the sociocultural influences of selection and preparation, of food/knowledge for consumption. It makes visible desire and taste and helps account for the rejection of some knowledges/food. It draws attention to *habitus* and socio-economic positioning and how this impacts on consumption (Bourdieu, 1984, pp.177–200). It encourages us to ask questions about the discriminations between food considered "good for you" or otherwise, as well as drawing attention to "comfort" food (and *comfort* facts). Importantly, it also draws attention to simultaneous acts of consuming and producing: and the technologies mobilised to store, slice and serve (not to mention *consume*) food/knowledges.

Versatility of this metaphor

We believe the consumption/learning metaphor is versatile. It can be put to use from a range of theoretical perspectives. In this final section we begin to explore how this metaphor might be put to work from a range of perspectives, as well as draw attention to some of the questions that these various engagements might promote.

Semantically speaking, the sharing of food can be seen as an important sociocultural practice that not only articulates identity (we are what we eat) but also facilitates understanding of differences. As one participant told us:

We have great lunches. Because we've got so many different nationalities here. And what we have is lunches and everyone brings these great dishes. [Co-worker] *makes the most amazing chicken curry.*

The generally unarticulated importance of breaking bread with managers and colleagues has been presented as critical for maintaining relationships and position (Rhodes, 2002; Rosen, 1985). And so while critical teas are occurring in contemporary workplaces, the ceremony associated with tea drinking, and the meanings it might suggest, date back significantly further. It has been suggested that tea and tea ceremony is also about, "aesthetic contemplation of landscape gardens, tea utensils, paintings, flower arrangement, and all the other elements that coexist in a harmonious relationship with the ceremony" as well as a "means for disciplining the mind" (Tanaka, 1974, pp. 21–2). Thinking about this might prompt one to ask: what ceremonies might be conducive to learning at work?

Anthropologically speaking, to support ideas of an important association between consumption and space, one might turn to Gusfield (1987) for a rather fascinating edited discussion about drinking and positioning in society. The name of this book alone, *Constructive Drinking* (Douglas, 1987), is promising enough for some. Gusfield explains the importance of drinking in the transformation of space and time for American workers (1987, pp. 77–81). Within our research project the participants also linked consuming (drinking), learning and shifts in social spaces:

We arrived with the manual and sat down and he said 'ok, who bought the wine'. So we have teambuilding. Some stay. Some don't stay. And that's optional. Like [name] *will say 'ok, we've got to have a drink this afternoon'. He's in a wine club and he always brings lots of wine and just leaves it in the fridge. People just stay.*

That's why the teambuilding works. We might start at quarter to five or four-thirty … 'ok, we're going to have a drink this afternoon'.

In this discussion, consumption and teambuilding were juxtaposed. If teambuilding is understood as learning to cooperate with co-workers, then again informal learning is evident in a consuming/learning space. Moreover, in a similar conversation the participants welcomed the opportunity to consume with a new manager:

Where he came from a head office environment, everyone went for a drink on Friday. Some went for an hour, some went for ten. Whatever. He came this day, he'd been there for a while, he said 'ok, we have teambuilding on Friday afternoon'. And we said 'oh right'.

Reflexively exploring our own such consumption, in regard to our research processes, draws attention to *our* attempts to learn about learning. It raises questions about what has been said when, as researchers, we are invited to consume with research participants. It makes us question our well-meaning cake and biscuit offerings as absolution for our acts of space invasion (Solomon, Boud and Rooney, 2004). It troubles our organisation of afternoon teas to facilitate process of our focus groups. It foregrounds questions about lunchtime conversations between various compilations of our research team, our coffee and chats in a nearby café: Who orders and who pays? It makes us ask questions about who initiates a beer (or two) after work, and highlights how much learning about learning we are actually doing then!

Managerially speaking, possibilities for understanding everyday learning at work arise that extend beyond the water cooler (NoDoubt and Research, 2001). Just as space

works on people, people can work on space. This is true of the pubs and cafés that workers appropriate for their dual consumptions – consuming/learning spaces where "secret" knowledges can be co-produced outside the surveillance of co-workers. Yet these spaces are not always considered "productive" as far as workplace learning and furthering productivity is concerned. This raises questions about how managers might understand the everyday "consuming" spaces in their organisations.

Discursively speaking, this metaphor draws attention to conversations. In our project data we noticed how much lunchtime conversation turns to work and thus provides opportunities for everyday learning through the negotiating/digesting of stories:

Oh yes, always. It's probably fifty-fifty work, and out of work discussions.

And reiterated by another participant:

…you will get little things that come up, like 'did you hear about this or that?' or things like that or you're there and you think 'oh I forgot to tell you, you know…'

And again by another participant:

I might talk about it [work] *around the lunch room table and we still do that about technical things – we still informally talk about it and ask questions and query.*

Nostalgically speaking, consumption has been implicated in our formal learning for a long time. The learning texts of Western youth are peppered with culinary associations. From our nursery rhymes (four and twenty blackbirds), to school texts like the well-known *Australian Wombat Stew* (Vaughan, 1987), which arguably adds a "national" flavour to our collective consumptions, just as, "*la frite*, chips, are the alimentary of Frenchness" (Barthes, 1972, p. 64)…*or not!*

Cultural theorists might ponder this metaphor in relation to some popular ideas currently in circulation. Some ideas from cultural studies take on new meaning in light of this form of consumption. Consider, for example, an emphasis on style, design and appearance of consumerables (Lury, 1996, p. 34) and how this might also be said about learning. Cultural theorists could make comment about the apparent increase in life-style programmes on public television, whose purpose is both to entertain and teach around the production of food (*Two Fat Ladies*, *My Restaurant Rules*, Jamie Oliver). Another point prevalent in cultural commentary is an increase in sites for consumption (Lury, 1996, p. 32). This too is pertinent in contemporary discussions of learning and education. The shifts in consumption habits and the increase in eating out (mobilising our metaphor) prompt us to explore if we consume our knowledge "out" more often too.

Satisfied?

This paper began with a warning not to consume this text in hope of being fulfilled. However, we believe we have served up something. We introduced some ideas about "space" that emerged from our research project and noting these learning/work spaces we also became aware of the significant consumption (eating and drinking) occurring in them. We have argued that thinking about learning as "consuming" offers possibilities for asking new questions about workplace learning. We suggested that by linking learning to the ordinariness of consuming enables us to ask some interesting questions

about everyday learning. This metaphor can be put to work from a range of theoretical perspectives, and we began to demonstrate how others might mobilise this metaphor to produce new understandings about learning. In essence, this has been a playful hors d'oeuvre, to stimulate further selection from a veritable smorgasbord, to satisfy a range of possible theoretical tastes.

While learning initiatives in organisations vary in detail and formation, they are typically formalised initiatives that presuppose a cause and effect relationship to produce particular types of learning. While this may well be a worthwhile pursuit for organisations, the whistles and bells of formalised initiatives may also be drowning out the chat of workers' learning informally over sandwiches and juice provided during the sanctioned pauses of "productive" workplace learning.

Bon appetit!

Note

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