

# Schooling, Learning, and the Life Course

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## Abstract

The modern life course is characterized by three major trends: (i) schooling has increased worldwide and penetrates virtually all phases of life; (ii) the globalization of the economy has rendered work, and the features of modern life that stem from it, less predictable; and (iii) new technologies and the ongoing institutionalization of the self allow for participation in an ever-increasing number of communities. These shifts open up new ways of thinking about the life course, moving from the traditional framing of the life course as a sequence of role transitions to a view that highlights competent membership in a configuration of communities of practice, particularly in the domains of work, family, and leisure. This shift also entails moving from schooling as credentials and human capital to understanding what is learned in school that is relevant to being a competent adult. Theories of how what is learned in school might transfer to adult life continue to outstrip the prevailing technologies for assessment of that learning.

## INTRODUCTION

Sociologists and applied developmental psychologists have organized the study of lives into a model of the life course, the sequence of events that individuals experience as they age from birth to death. Such models are centered on adulthood, a phase of life that is defined by work and family roles and responsibilities; earlier life course stages, such as infancy, childhood, and adolescence, are prefatory to adulthood, and old age, which is characterized by the gradual relinquishment of roles and responsibilities, follows it.

In this essay, I examine the linkages among schooling, learning, and the life course. I begin by describing a set of macroforces giving rise to a new, unstable and less predictable life course. I then examine the implications of these changes for how social scientists tie schooling to the life course, critiquing the limited attention to learning and the transfer of knowledge in prevailing models. I conclude with a discussion of the challenges of conceptualizing and measuring what is learned in school.

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## SOCIAL CHANGE AND THE LIFE COURSE

Three potentially contradictory trends characterize the course of lives in modern societies. First, schooling has become ubiquitous. Across the world, in virtually every country, a higher proportion of young people attend school than ever before. Rates of primary, secondary and tertiary enrollment have skyrocketed, as has the global literacy rate, now estimated at 84% for those 15 and older (Huebler & Lu, 2013). Schooling, the formal organized form of education, now reaches further into the social fabric, influencing other social institutions such as the economy, the family, religion, the military, government, and the civic sphere, to name just a few (Baker, 2014). In the language of neoinstitutionalists, schooling not only reacts to changes in other social institutions, but actively creates society, generating new forms of knowledge, new social roles, and new identities to which other institutions must adapt. Although individuals spend a relatively small fraction of their lives enrolled in school, schooling has profound direct and indirect effects on how those lives unfold. This is particularly true for the socioeconomic status of an individual and his or her family, as educational attainment is a major determinant of occupational status, income, and wealth, and the qualities of life that these assets can purchase.

Second, individual lives have become less predictable. This is most apparent in the stage of life between adolescence and adulthood, however one defines these terms, but is also evident in adulthood. The empirical regularities of the past have been superseded by a period marked by instabilities in the spheres of work and family. Arnett (2006) refers to this new stage of life as *emerging adulthood*, during which young people explore their identities through frequent transitions among jobs, romantic partners, and leisure activities. A generation earlier, Namboodiri (1987) referred to this time as the *floundering* phase of the life course. The major driver of this instability is a global economy in which the interests of multinational firms lead to weakened ties between individuals and their employers.

Nowhere is this latter trend clearer than postindustrial Japan, where eroding linkages between schools and firms, accompanied by truncated commitments by employers to their workers, have created what Brinton (2011) refers to as a *lost generation* of youth, unable to find its location in the world. Recent college graduates in the United States, though not subject to as rigid a set of expectations as their Japanese counterparts, also report difficulty finding meaningful jobs and sustaining romantic relationships (Arum & Roksa, 2014).

It is too early to tell whether the instabilities facing young people today—a complex amalgam of heightened choice in some domains, and restricted choice in others—will reverberate throughout their lives to come. However,

there is already evidence that economic globalization is amplifying uncertainty and the perception of risk associated with daily life. Neoliberal state policies deregulating markets and promoting privatization have weakened the social safety nets that protected individuals from the harshest consequences of economic downturns; and periods of boom and bust have become more volatile and less predictable in a global market. In a number of countries, the standard career for middle-aged men has shifted to a “patchwork” career of fragmented, contingent jobs (Mills & Blossfeld, 2006).

Third, the social distance between individuals is no longer dictated by the physical distance that separates them. Technological change, most notably in the form of new information and communication technologies, now allow individuals at some geographic distance to engage with one another on matters of mutual interest, both vocational and otherwise. With the ongoing institutionalization and cultivation of the self in Western societies (Gergen, 1991; Meyer, 1986), individuals may choose to join groups organized around common personal interests, ranging from role-playing games to reading groups to political action committees. Members of such groups may come to know one another quite well through social interaction mediated by technology, even if they have never met face-to-face. Technological change has increased such opportunities exponentially.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STUDY OF THE LIFE COURSE

These three trends suggest that the course of lives in modern societies has become increasingly heterogeneous and unpredictable over the past two decades. However, social scientists have been slow to incorporate the implications of the growing heterogeneity of individual lives into understandings of the linkages among schooling, learning, and the life course. Sociologists developed a typology of life course stages at a time when national economies were expanding and most families were formed via marital childbearing. Leaving school, beginning a regular job, getting married, having children, and moving out of one’s parents’ home all marked a shift from dependence on the family into which one was born to independence and increased responsibility for self and others. Although there has always been attention to variations in the timing and sequencing of these transitions, both across birth cohorts within a country and across countries, adulthood itself was viewed as fairly stable. Unplanned and unrehearsed events—for example, losing one’s job, or becoming a widow—disrupted established patterns but also were relatively rare.

Schooling did not figure prominently in understandings of the life course, beyond its association with occupational attainment and, to a lesser extent, the timing of marriage and family formation. In part, this is due to the

lingering influence of human capital theory, developed by economists to incorporate a more diverse set of production factors into models of economic productivity, at the macrolevel, and to account for individual investment decisions in education and other forms of capital at the microlevel. In the absence of direct measures of individual productivity, economists relied on educational credentials as a proxy for the knowledge, skills, and values that employers reward in the labor market. The specific content, form, and quality of these attributes, lodged deeply within the individual's head, were of little interest. To be sure, economists drew a distinction between general human capital and firm-specific human capital, recognizing that some knowledge and skills (e.g., knowing something about basic accounting principles) might be valued in many different firms, whereas other knowledge and skills (e.g., knowing the intricacies of a particular accounting software platform) might be highly valued in one setting and of little or no importance in another.

For economists, macro- and microeconomic productivity has been in the foreground, and schooling has been viewed as in service to it, cultivating knowledge, skills, and orientations that contribute to productivity, and hence are valued by employers. Sociologists, however, have treated education and the economy as two of a more elaborated set of social institutions that organize society. Institutions are associated with social roles, specific positions with broadly shared expectations about how individuals who inhabit the position should behave. A social map of the life course can be constructed by arraying the timing and sequencing of movement into and out of specific social roles: student, graduate, spouse, parent, widow, worker, and retiree, to name but a few.

Although models of the timing and sequencing of role transitions—especially those in the spheres of education, family, the economy, and the military—have dominated empirical research on the sociology of the life course, they have a limited capacity to contribute to an understanding of the role of schooling in the life course, and specifically how and why what is learned in school matters. This is because inhabiting a social role tells us little about whether an individual is performing a role *well*. There are qualitative variations in role performance that are not captured by the binary distinction between performing and not performing a specific role. A mother may be a “good” mother or a “bad” mother, an electrician a master or a novice, and a gardener a recognized expert or one who has difficulty distinguishing the flowers from the weeds. What is learned in school may be as closely tied to how *well* individuals perform social roles as to which social roles they take on.

Moreover, social roles are characterized by a set of norms, or behaviors that individuals are expected to fulfill while enacting a role. However, these expected behaviors may be highly detailed, whereas the norms that are

taught and learned in school are maddeningly abstract. Dreeben (1968) labeled the key norms, taught in school because other social institutions were not well situated to convey them, as achievement, independence, universalism, and specificity. More recently, Brint, Contreras, and Matthews (2001) identified norms pertaining to basic organizational controls (e.g., industriousness), self-regulation and the relation of the self to others, traditional moral virtues (e.g., fairness, courage), and “modern” values (e.g., choice, respect for group differences) as the hidden curriculum of California primary schools. If these norms are what is learned in school, it is difficult to see how they mediate the link between schooling and the life course, as they are so loosely tied to the specific expectations associated with the roles that adults perform.

A conceptual shift from roles and norms to communities and social practices offers greater promise. Social roles can be reconceptualized as memberships in communities of practice, groups of individuals who are collectively engaged in a common agenda (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Practices are what community members *do* to further their common goals; these practices are derived from a shared repertoire of experiences and negotiation (referred to as *participation*) and tools, symbols, rules, and documents (referred to as *reification*). A community of practice is a community because its members engage with one another (although this engagement need not be face-to-face, and can occur entirely online); it is inherently local, rather than global, because of this mutual engagement. State Supreme Court justices in Alabama are not part of the same community of practice as their counterparts in Wisconsin, even though the practices associated with “judging” in one state may overlap with those in the other. Many of the rules and documents (e.g., controlling federal laws) may be shared across these two communities, and the justices may have taken the same array of courses in law school, but a particular case may have arisen in Alabama, and obliged the justices to come to terms with one or more issues that justices in Wisconsin would not address. To the extent that there are continuities in the meaning derived from goals, membership, experiences, tools, and artifacts across communities of practice that may be dispersed geographically, we can describe them as a connected *constellation* of communities of practice (Pallas, 2001; Wenger, 1998).

#### RECONCEPTUALIZING SCHOOL KNOWLEDGE AND THE PROBLEM OF TRANSFER

If the life course is reframed as participation in multiple communities of practice, what is the role of schooling in the life course? How, if at all, is what is learned in school associated with being a competent member of a community

of practice? We can retain the premise that schooling is the social institution that society charges with the task of socializing the young to become competent adults—that is, to perform adult social roles competently. The socialization process involves assisting students in developing a set of cognitive skills and inculcating in them a set of behaviors, values, norms, and dispositions. As both of these tasks involve learning, we can state that schooling is primarily about learning, particularly the learning of social practices usually associated with adult communities of practice. For example, a dispatcher in a factory shipping department may engage in the social practice of determining how many boxes of various sizes and shapes can be placed on a truck with particular interior dimensions. Similarly, a social scientist may engage in the social practice of judging how well an equation fits a particular body of data. These particular practices, no doubt initially learned in school, draw on a range of mathematical skills necessary for different forms of adult work.

The notion of transfer—the idea that what has been initially learned in one context can be extended to other contexts—is highly contested (Barnett & Ceci, 2002), and an unfortunate consequence of the balkanization of the social sciences is that economists and sociologists have not been attentive to psychologists' and anthropologists' research and theorizing about learning transfer. The new knowledge and understandings that are the object of learning are specific—one learns something in particular—and the new science of learning has provided new insights into the conditions under which learning is most likely to occur and to transfer to new settings. The point is that knowledge often does *not* transfer. The prior knowledge that learners bring to a setting matters, and new understandings emerge from how novel information engages with that prior knowledge. Competence in many domains requires both factual knowledge and an ability to organize that knowledge into a framework that facilitates retrieval, remolding, and application as manifestations of transfer. In addition, learners can exercise more control over their learning via the use of metacognitive strategies for monitoring what they understand, and what might advance those understandings (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000).

### The Nature of School Knowledge

The new science of learning, which sees knowledge as situated, challenges existing conceptions of school knowledge, and its implications for adult life. Most social scientists, and the policymakers they seek to influence, conceive of school knowledge as existing in the world, independent of the learner, but received by him or her. This knowledge typically takes the form of facts (e.g., knowing that four times eight is 32) or principles (e.g., knowing how to

calculate the area of a rectangle by multiplying the length of the rectangle by its width). “Knowing that” and “knowing how” are the two most common ways of thinking about school knowledge (Broudy, 1977). If a child correctly answers “32 inches” to a test question stating, “find the area of a rectangle that is 4 inches tall and 8 inches wide,” we generally are willing to conclude that the child knows that the area of a  $4 \times 8$  rectangle is 32, or knows how to calculate the area of a rectangle. “Knowing that” the area of a  $4 \times 8$  rectangle is 32 involves replicating knowledge that already has been assimilated, whereas “knowing how” to calculate the area of a rectangle involves applying knowledge acquired in one context to a new and different context (Broudy, 1977).

### Knowledge Transfer

Many social scientists typically assume that the knowledge learned in school transfers quite readily from one context to another. Bransford and Schwartz (1999) refer to this as the *direct application* model, in which knowledge transfer is conceived of as the ability to apply what one has previously learned directly to a new setting or problem. This direct application model of knowledge transfer is clearly evident in the sociology and economics literatures regardless of whether school learning is treated as a dependent or an independent variable. When school learning is an outcome, it is customary to assume that the knowledge that students have learned at home transfers to the school. Conversely, when school learning is an independent variable, as in studies of occupational achievement or earnings, the assumption that measures of learning (i.e., test scores, or perhaps grades) index human capital implies that school learning can easily translate into competence at work. [The workplace as a context that might facilitate or hinder knowledge transfer (Smith, 1999) is rarely taken into account.] Both assumptions are called into question by a view of school learning as a social activity shaped by its social and cultural context.

The analytic challenge to linking schooling to the life course via learning is identifying what social practices are needed to become competent members of the varied communities of practice—in domains such as work, family, and leisure—in which adults participate. Individuals have a unique configuration of communities of practice with which they are affiliated, and the practices to be learned may differ substantially across them. The practices needed to organize a weekend bicycle club may differ from those that make one a competent illustrator in an advertising agency, or an able advocate for an ailing parent. However, if we are to link schooling to competent membership in these communities, we must identify these practices, and then map backward to what is learned in school that might promote learning them.

## Assessment

If what is learned in school is a set of social practices that prepare individuals to become competent members of adult communities, how are we to assess the success of schools and schooling in promoting this learning? In the absence of sustained social science research on this question, public policy has leapt to fill the void. External school accountability systems, often tied to standardized assessments, have popped up across and within countries like so many mushrooms in a summer yard.

Standardized tests arguably can be adequate vehicles for summarizing factual knowledge (knowing that) and procedural knowledge (knowing how) although the discussion of transfer above makes the latter problematic. However, many social practices that identify someone as a competent adult seem to require a kind of knowing that is not, and perhaps cannot, be tapped by standardized tests. Broudy (1977) contrasts *knowing that* and *knowing how*, which refer to learning of discrete knowledge and skills, with “knowing with” a more cumulative set of knowledge and experiences derived through membership in a community of practice. Bransford and Schwartz (1999) quote Brody as saying that an individual “thinks, perceives and judges with everything that he has studied in school, even though he cannot recall those learnings on demand” (Broudy, 1977, p. 12). “Knowing with” differs from “knowing that” or “knowing how” because it involves a kind of interpretation that cannot be reduced to replicating or applying knowledge.

The state of play in assessing this form of knowledge is quite primitive. The relevant knowledge learned in schools may not be easily distilled either into a set of facts (knowing that) or even a set of abstract principles (knowing how). Standardized tests, which Bransford and Schwartz (1999) characterize as sequestering an individual from the resources that might help him or her to solve a new problem, rarely deal with “knowing with” as a form of school knowledge. Moreover, to the extent that “knowing with” in a community of practice involves interactions with other people, standardized tests fall short, as they typically assess individual performance isolated from the shared tools and cognition that exist in the workplace and other settings where people are working together on tasks (Resnick, 1987).

Perhaps the closest we have come to advancing beyond the measurement of factual and procedural knowledge—and it is a far cry from the ideal—is in the form of assessments of critical reasoning. One such measure, the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), was the centerpiece of Arum and Roksa’s (2011) critique of American higher education, *Academically adrift: Limited learning on college campuses*. These scholars surveyed students at two dozen US 4-year postsecondary institutions at various points of their college careers, concluding that a substantial fraction of college students showed



no gains on the CLA, despite the fact that it was designed to assess the kinds of skills that liberal arts institutions claim to cultivate: scientific and quantitative reasoning, problem-solving skills, and the ability to construct and critique arguments. Although subsequent studies have yielded slightly more optimistic results, the persistent message is that US postsecondary institutions are failing. Calls for the use of assessments such as the CLA in federal college accountability systems, which gathered steam with the 2006 report of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education (the “Spellings Commission”), continue unabated.

Critics of Arum and Roksa’s (2011) conclusions noted the tension between what colleges teach and what the CLA assesses. Disciplinary knowledge, presumably central to the college experience, and organized into college majors and courses, is not assessed. Students may, therefore, be learning a great deal in college—as research using subject-specific assessments has demonstrated—but this learning is not what the CLA assesses. In fact, an assessment such as the CLA must assume only a minimum of disciplinary knowledge to be appropriate for a wide swath of college students. Whether assessments of critical thinking such as the CLA can serve as measures of “knowing with” is still unclear.

### Summary

Efforts to understand the role of schooling in the life course have been hampered by inattention to what is learned in school that is relevant to being a competent adult. In this essay, I have identified a series of changes in the structure of the life course that have rendered modern life less predictable and more local, even as global economic forces and technological change exercise more influence over individual lives. I have sought to reconceptualize the life course as competent membership in a configuration of communities of practice, particularly in the domains of work, family, and leisure. Doing so draws attention to the social practices on which members of these communities rely, and the challenge of identifying the antecedents to the learning of these practices in what is learned in school. Assessment of the school learning that prefigures competent adult participation remains in its infancy.

### PROMISING DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Among the many possible avenues for advancing our understanding of the linkage between schooling and the life course, three are especially salient. First, the field could benefit from a detailed description and analytic accounting of the ways in which communities of practice select members on the basis

of the quantity and quality of their schooling. We know a good deal about this in particular domains but lack a way of expressing this across social institutions. For example, research on assortative mating can illuminate the extent to which family members select one another on the basis of schooling credentials, and why. Research on intergenerational mobility can reveal continuities across generations in the quantity and quality of schooling, and studies of the school-to-work transition can model the mutual selection of workers, jobs, and firms on the basis of educational credentials. Scholars studying social movements, voluntary associations, and political socialization can model the propensity for civic participation and leisure activities to select on particular configurations of the quantity and quality of schooling. These pursuits, singly and in combination, can extend our understanding of the existing empirical associations linking schooling to membership in communities of practice, and suggest the mechanisms that account for these associations.

Second, we are overdue for a more comprehensive approach to studying the contribution of schooling to the learning of norms and social practices. Through much of the twentieth century, there was a shift in research and policy away from the study of moral and character development and toward the role of schooling in cultivating specific cognitive skills. We now know far more about the contribution of schooling, and variations in school organization and practice, to the development of literacy and numeracy skills than of what are occasionally referred to as *soft* skills. These skills, which surely do involve cognition, are also labeled “people” skills, connoting the ability of individuals to engage with others, as is inevitable in communities of practice.

There is a risk that we will find that schools and schooling are not very successful in transforming these traits and attributes of individuals, bolstering the institutionalist claim that the perception of schooling’s influence outstrips its measured effect. Without more systematic research, though, we simply cannot assess how well schooling prepares individuals for competent participation in an array of communities of practice.

Finally, research on a new generation of educational assessments holds the promise of measuring the performance of individuals both in isolation and in group settings. For the latter, it is imperative to move beyond having group members assess their own and others’ contributions to group learning and performance. The challenge here is twofold. First, the field of educational assessment can benefit from a broader appreciation of the desired types of human performance to be measured. This is primarily a philosophical and epistemological issue. Second, new programs of research on measuring performance that is situated in a group context can extend the practices of modern testing and assessment theory to this new, more complex environment. Whether this can be done in ways that meet conventional standards of reliability and validity is an open question.

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