

'It's not like a normal 9 to 5!': the learning journeys of media production apprentices in distributed working conditions.

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## **Abstract**

An apprenticeship in media production in England is at the centre of this case-study exploration. The context is exemplified by the organisation of the process of production around project teams and the development of project-based working cultures. Given these developments, the working conditions and learning opportunities presented to apprentices can be characterised as de-centred and distributed. This contrasts with the characterisation of apprentices' learning as novices who develop expertise in stable, well-bounded vocational communities. Through an analysis of young apprentices' journeys, we argue that despite the challenges presented, the case study exemplifies the extent to which the apprenticeship is capable of innovation in project-working as opposed to full employment conditions. Through its focus on media apprentices' journeys, this paper makes visible the specific experience of learning in project-working, distributed and de-centred working conditions. We conclude by referring to an ideal typical conception of the model of learning underpinning the apprenticeship which may be useful as a heuristic tool for others involved in designing and/or researching apprenticeships in project working conditions.

## **Key Words**

**Apprenticeship; Social Capital; Project Working; Model of Learning; Media Production.**

## Introduction

In their editorial introduction to the JNET special issue on Apprenticeships, Fuller and Unwin (2011) argue that contemporary discussions of the concept of apprenticeship confirm both the part played by apprenticeships in the vocational education and training (VET) systems of many countries and in the development of social theories of learning and identity formation. Firmly documenting both the interest in apprenticeship throughout Europe and beyond, as well as the part played by apprenticeship in various VET systems, the 2011 special issue aimed to assess the innovative capacity of apprenticeship as, first and foremost, a model of learning. Specifically, the special issue set out to assess:

...the extent to which apprenticeship can be said to be capable of innovation as it evolves and adapts to the changing contexts it inhabits. (Fuller and Unwin 2011:261)

Since the special issue publication, discussion of the part to be played by apprenticeships in VET in England has rarely left the political and education policy agenda. Indeed during the UK general election held in May 2015, it was hard to find a politician who did not mention apprenticeships in their responses to questions that ranged from those concerning solutions to the apparent skills gap in the UK economy and issues to do with youth unemployment, to the question of the future funding of UK Higher Education. In June 2015, the UK Government announced its intention to protect the term 'apprenticeship' in law, through an Enterprise Bill which would also commit public bodies to meeting targets on apprenticeships. In a move reminiscent of the UK Government's approach to youth training in the 1980s, apprenticeships are, one again, being construed at one and the same time as a panacea for the economic stability of the UK economy and as a way of reducing dependency on welfare.

Notwithstanding the significance of the policy attention and the commitment to protect the term apprenticeship in law (although protection from what is not made clear), the current political discourse largely omits any conceptualisation of apprenticeship and what it means to learn throughout an apprenticeship. This position is, of course, not new; the focus on targets and numbers and the generic (mis)use of the term apprenticeship has dominated JNET discussions and, in England at least, led to the meaning of apprenticeship being

'significantly diluted' (Fuller and Unwin, 2009:406). At the centre of this dilution, has been the on-going concern of many (see *inter alia*, Bynner, 2011; Brockmann, Clarke, and Winch 2010; Keep and James, 2011) that, with the introduction of state-regulated youth training in the 1980s and the development of a 'one type fits all' approach to apprenticeships, the central pillars of apprenticeship have been fractured (Fuller and Unwin, 2009).

These central pillars are concerned with a model of learning which not only recognises the journey an individual makes to acquire the specific skills and knowledge needed for the development of vocational expertise, but also integrates the development of an occupational identity and the process of 'becoming' (Colley et al, 2003; Hodkinson et al, 2008). Arguably, the fracture has been exacerbated in England as governments of all persuasions have sought to grow the numbers of apprenticeships as a panacea for its economic ills, without due regard to the learning experience offered. In Fuller and Unwin's (2004) terms, under these conditions a 'restricted' model of apprenticeship is much more likely, accompanied by a slippage of responsibility for training from employers to the State. This slippage is epitomised by the shift to a *supply-led* vehicle of state policy from its historic origin as a *demand-led* model of skill formation (Fuller and Unwin, 2009).

In response, this paper seeks to address the question raised by the JNET special issue regarding the innovative capacity of apprenticeship through a case study exploration of the journeys of young apprentices in media production in England. We present this case study primarily because of the challenges it presents to our understanding of apprenticeship as a model of learning and as a 'critical case' in the sense that of central importance to this exploration is a full understanding of '...the context the apprenticeship inhabits' (Fuller and Unwin 2011:261). As will be discussed further, the media production apprenticeship context is exemplified by the organisation of the process of production around project teams (Deuze, 2007) and, following Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), the development of project-based working cultures and freelance employment.

These working conditions present challenges for the development of an apprenticeship. In the first instance, while apprentices have traditionally been characterised as novices who develop expertise in stable, well-bounded vocational communities (Lave and Wenger, 1991;

Sennett, 2008), apprentices' learning in project working contexts can be characterised, following Hutchins (1995), as de-centred and distributed. In developing apprenticeships in such contexts the provision of continuous learning experiences, for example, will present more challenges. However, developing continuity of learning experience in an apprenticeship is not unique to media production or to project-based contexts. Bakkevig Dagsland et al. (2015) have shown that apprenticeships in the hospitality industry in Norway face similar challenges due to the seasonal nature of work. Indeed additional challenges in the hospitality context come in the form of the development of relationships with experienced peers in an industry with a particularly high turnover of staff. The differences between the challenges faced by the hospitality industry and the media production context, however, is that in the latter context, apprentices' learning is organised in project-working employment contexts and not in conditions where full employment is the norm. There is, in project-based working, prior knowledge of the time-bound nature of the life of the project. Arguably, this should foreground the design and development of any apprenticeship in such contexts. Nevertheless, provision of an apprenticeship in working contexts where the pattern of employment is project-based and where freelance working is the norm raises questions about the innovative capacity of the model of learning on which it is based.

Through its focus on media apprentices' journeys, this paper aims to make visible the experience of learning in distributed and de-centred working conditions so that we might assess the extent to which apprenticeship can be capable of innovation as a result of changing contexts. In so doing, we identify the challenges that need to be addressed in developing apprenticeships in such contexts and suggest that the arguments being made in this paper may extend insight into apprenticeships which take place in multiple contexts rather than with one single employer.

This paper is divided into three sections. Following the introduction, the second section provides an account of the project working context in the sector in the UK in which the apprenticeship developed: the Creative and Cultural Sector (CCS). It moves on to describe the media production apprenticeship, focusing on the goals of the apprenticeship and the ways in which recruitment and organisation aim to meet these goals. The third section

explains the research methodology before presenting the accounts of apprentices' journeys as they develop vocational practice, identity and social capital in distributed working conditions. We conclude by referring to an ideal typical conception of the model of learning (Guile and Lahiff, 2012) which we argue underpins the apprenticeship in project working contexts. It is hoped that in presenting the ideal model as a heuristic device it may be useful to others involved in designing and/or researching apprenticeships in project working conditions and where apprenticeships are conceived as, primarily, a model of learning.

### **The Contextual Conditions: The Creative and Cultural Sector**

The broad context for the apprenticeship in media production is the world of broadcasting, film and music which has long been seen as part of what is known as the Creative and Cultural Sector (CCS) in the UK. The CCS plays an increasingly important part of the modern UK economy with the Department of Culture Media and Sport (2015) stating that the UK's creative Industries, were worth £71.4 billion per year to the UK economy. Characterised by a mixture of global and national organisations, public familiarity around broadcasting tends to lean towards the big names in terrestrial media production in the UK, such as the BBC and ITV. However, most media production companies fall into the small to medium size enterprise (SME) category (Skillset, 2010a).

In terms of employment and working practices, the sector is increasingly populated by freelance workers on short term and/or renewable contracts. The labour market is therefore increasingly understood to be external in character in contrast to more traditional employer-specific labour markets. As a result, media production workers are increasingly employed on a temporary, contractual basis for a range of companies (Blair, 2001; Caves, 2000; Ursell, 2000). The effect of this development in employment practices needs to be seen in relation to the nature of the work being undertaken. In media production contexts, project teams are gathered to reflect the demands of the project-based contract and, where necessary, the life cycle of the production process. Project teams are therefore assembled for a season or a one-off TV or radio drama and then disbanded where necessary. Additionally, within media production companies, those responsible for staffing schedules act as intermediaries and

recommend people from their networks for positions in new project teams (Guile and Lahiff, 2012).

It is important to recognise the significance of these changing employment practices before attention turns to the apprentices' learning journeys. In these conditions, media production organisations buy-in expertise as and when needed and the workforce goal can be understood to be one where individuals form what Blair (2001:161) has described in the film industry as '*semi-permanent work groups*' where individuals move from job to job as a ready-made unit, exemplifying Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005:107) '*project working*' culture.

These project-working practices reflect the realities of employment across media production companies – practices which Blair (2001) characterised in her critique of dual labour market analyses of the US and UK film industries more than fifteen years ago. The consequences for recruitment practices have particular implications for the organisation of an apprenticeship, as well as for the learning experiences of apprentices, and are central to the discussion which follows.

Traditionally, entry routes into the whole range of technical trades required of the media production project team including sound, lighting, special effects and carpentry would have been via an apprenticeship and, once completed, the apprentice tended to remain with the company (Briggs, 1985). However, there had not been an apprenticeship programme in the broadcast industry in the UK for nearly two decades. Once employment conditions changed and companies began to draw from a pool of freelance labour, the question of how long the pool would be able to supply skilled, technical, practitioners raised its head. Indeed, by 2010 a Skillset<sup>3</sup> review of skills in the sector for the North of England, the area in which the case study apprenticeship was based, reported a particular skills-gap in these areas:

There are shortages of technological skills in areas such as special effects, scenic painting, carpentry, make-up artistry, vision-mixing, properly qualified electricians, animation and cross-platform skills among journalists (Skillset, 2010a:5)

Explanations for the absence of an apprenticeship programme in media production can be found, partly, in the form, structure and requirements of the Advanced Apprenticeship (AA)

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<sup>3</sup> the sector skills council with responsibility for the sector

and the relationship to the changing employment practices (Guile and Lahiff, 2012). In essence, every occupational sector had to ensure that its apprenticeship framework conformed to the national 'blueprint'. One of the main requirements of the AA was that employers offer apprentices employed status, which was usually interpreted as a full-time and permanent position with the employer during and on completion of the apprenticeship.

Given that the AA reflected a traditional model of an apprenticeship served with one employer in relatively stable, full employment conditions, the AA was not able to accommodate the requirements of the industry's project-working, freelance-led practices. As Skillset (2010a: 8) made clear:

... few Creative Media employers have the ability to "employ" an apprentice for a 15/18/24 month period as is the current norm in Government funded apprenticeships.

### **The Apprenticeship in Media Production**

The level 3 apprenticeship in media production was located in the England's Northwest Region: centring on the cities of Manchester and Liverpool. The BBC in the region, working together with a collection of SMEs, acknowledged that there was a gap in entry-level workforce development in media production (for a fuller discussion of the emergence of the apprenticeship, see Guile and Lahiff, 2012). After a period of negotiation a 'pilot' apprenticeship was eventually agreed with Skillset and it was recognised that for any apprenticeship to succeed it had to reflect the contract-culture of the industry. This meant, among other things, that the 'employed status' of apprentices was configured differently.

A well-respected agency with a mission to promote the creative and digital economy in England's Northwest region, was approached to act as an 'intermediary agency' (Guile, 2010). It provided the 'employed status' for the apprentices over the two years of the programme, while the companies signed up to offer work placements. It also acted as an agent to help in the recruitment of the apprentices alongside the training provider, a local further education (FE) college with expertise in media production. The agency appointed a placements advisor who negotiated placements with apprentices, the college tutors and the various companies involved.

Collaboration between employers in a local area - particularly SMEs – and the evolution of an



intermediary agency in apprenticeships is not, of course, without precedent. In England, the intermediary agency can be seen as sharing some characteristics with Group Training Agencies (GTAs) in that, ‘...GTAs have evolved in response to the needs of and strategic leadership from local employers...’ (Unwin, 2012:12). However, the comparison is limited because the agency did not act as a training provider in this instance. Outside the UK, in the Swiss VET system, Leemann and Imdorf (2015) describe the establishment of so-called training networks ‘Ausbildungsverbände’. This is where enterprises form a network and pool their in-company training resources for the joint training of apprentices (2015:286).

The difference between this Swiss model and the intermediary agency at the centre of this research is that the media production intermediary agency did not provide the training for the apprenticeship; this was provided by the local further education college. Nevertheless, the agency’s involvement in the placement of apprentices in the various media companies did mirror some activities of the Ausbildungsverbände and, as will be seen, there are some parallels in the lessons to be learned from the ‘...reluctant adoption of this promising form of organising VET in Switzerland’ (Leemann and Imdorf, 2015:284).

### **The Goals of the Apprenticeship**

The goals of the pilot media production apprenticeship reflected the need to not only address the skills gap at entry level, but also to reflect the working practices of the sector. This meant setting out with the intention to develop apprentices’ awareness of the importance of developing networks of contacts to secure work in the industry. More aspirationally, the pilot apprenticeship aimed to diversify recruitment into the sector by recruiting local youngsters straight from school or college.

The aims of the apprenticeship were, therefore, to:

- diversify entry routes into the broadcasting industry;
- support the apprentices’ development of knowledge and skill for work in the industry;
- facilitate access to media production networks to develop as freelancers in the industry.

To address the diversity aim applications were invited from 16-21 year olds resident in the

region who could demonstrate that they had an interest in media and were qualified to GCSE/level 2 equivalents. The stakeholders accepted, however, that a conventional approach to recruitment (based on advertisement and interviews) would not necessarily assist them to realise their other goals – to recruit those who might be best suited to work as freelancers in the industry. The potential to exercise agency – the quality which was felt to be essential to surviving as a freelancer – was therefore seen as a key criteria in the recruitment process for the apprenticeship. For this reason, the recruitment process was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, the college agreed to recruit a cohort of students for both the apprenticeship and for a full time college Diploma in Media Production. Once recruited, all students worked towards a common induction certificate with progression routes into the apprenticeship or the full time diploma. The second phase involved an educational version of what Marsden (2007: 965) has described as a “tournament contest”. This refers to the process whereby companies offer internships to graduates and use workplace observation of the graduates to determine subsequent employment offers.

Drawing upon working practices in the industry, be-spoke teaching, learning and assessment activities were developed and woven into the learning at college in phase one. These activities enabled the students to demonstrate their capacity to exercise agency, to take on a group leadership role and also to work collaboratively and imaginatively. Through assessment of these learning activities and presentations, final decisions regarding acceptance onto the apprenticeship were made by a panel of college tutors, employer representatives and the intermediary agency. Approximately half of the students (20) progressed onto the apprenticeship. Although not the subject of discussion in this paper, our findings from college-based interviews and focus groups with students demonstrated that for those who were selected for the apprenticeship, a great sense of achievement at being ‘chosen’ was realised. They expressed their joy at being chosen as: *‘we’ve won a place!’*

The apprenticeship was structured around four, 8-10 week negotiated work placements. These were organised by the intermediary agency in consultation with the employers, college tutors and apprentices. The educational component, a City & Guilds Diploma (level 3) was delivered by the college and organised in blocks between placements to better reflect the

demands of the production process and working practices. As part of their commitment, employers accepted that offering apprentices the opportunity to experience networking opportunities and, thereby, develop social capital, was central to the workplace learning experiences on offer. As will become clear, apprentices were given workplace placements in a range of settings as integral members of the project team in entry level positions, generically described as 'runners' in the industry.

In summary, the pilot apprenticeship that evolved was industry-led and organised by an intermediary agency; reflective of the specific needs of the media production context and supported by an industry-specific sector skills council which acknowledged the constraints of the 'one-size-fits-all' AA. Its collaborative provision was exemplified by the intermediary agency which liaised with SMEs and large employers in the local area which not only shared a history of specialism in the industry, but was also ear-marked as a geographical hub for future specialism (viz. BBC's Media City in Salford, Manchester). In structural and organisational terms the apprenticeship can be construed as 'innovative' in the sense that its emergence in a project-working, freelance employment context illustrates how, under collaborative arrangements, an apprenticeship can '...evolve and adapt to the changing contexts it inhabits'(Fuller and Unwin 2011:261). Whilst questions remain regarding the sustainability of such a model, particularly given its dependence on employer collaboration, the next section moves onto explore the learning journeys of apprentices and to consider their lived experiences of the apprenticeship. The research strategy is introduced first.

### **Researching the Apprenticeship in Media production**

Our approach to researching the apprentices' learning journeys was guided by the need to reflect the multiple learning contexts apprentices would experience in various media production work placements and in the college. Therefore, alongside the apprentices, we also wanted to ensure that the views of the range of practitioners involved in apprentices' learning were captured. We therefore chose to generate situated, qualitative data (Jenkins et al, 2010) through focus groups and interviews, conducted, where possible, in the settings in which the learning was taking place. Our sample participants therefore included apprentices, their workplace supervisors/co-workers, college tutors and the work-based

assessor. Interviews were also conducted with key participants and stakeholders involved in the development of the apprenticeship; the co-ordinator from the intermediary organisation and representatives from Skillset (Guile and Lahiff, 2012).

The research into apprentices' learning journeys reported in this paper took place over an 18 month period, between 2010 and 2012. Interviews with apprentices were conducted during three out of the four media production work placements and during one college block. In total 16 semi-structured, one-to-one interviews with apprentices and one focus group were conducted. All interviews and focus group discussions were conducted by the authors and were recorded digitally and fully transcribed. For the purposes of this paper we will be drawing solely upon data from the interviews and focus groups with the apprentices whilst on their work placements.

Our first contact with apprentices was during a day event at the intermediary organisation. The apprentices had finished their first (of four) ten week placements and were making individual arrangements with the intermediary agency for their second work placement. Over the course of the day, we ran two focus groups and secured agreement from four apprentices in one focus group to follow them through their subsequent work placements and college experience. The sample can therefore be described as convenience in nature (Robson, 2002). It had no purposive features. It emerged from the focus group apprentices who were in attendance at the time of our familiarisation visit. An additional apprentice, (Michelle) who was introduced to one of us by a line manager during a workplace visit, joined the original sample group after the first set of interviews.

With regard to the sampling, it should be remembered, however, that all of the apprentices had been explicitly selected from a wider group of qualifying students for their *potential* to exercise agency –as described above. As has been described, their orientation towards the apprenticeship was positive. They had been chosen; they were on the 'winning team'. Additionally, our research was designed to capture the apprentices' respective journeys in project-working contexts rather than to evaluate the apprenticeship per se. We did not, therefore, seek out students who did not, for example, gain entry to the apprenticeship or withdraw from the apprenticeship.

A brief profile of the apprentices is summarised in Table 1 below. Characteristics include gender and age but no self-declaration of ethnicity was established in the course of discussions. All apprentices had level 2 qualifications, including GCSEs in Maths and English or equivalent. All names used in this paper are pseudo-names.

**Table 1 : Apprentices' Profile**

[Insert table 1]

**Developing vocational practice, identity and social capital in distributed working conditions**

The following sections provide an account of apprentices' occupationally-specific learning and, in particular, the development of social capital. Using selected quotations we focus firstly on the apprentices' learning in relation to the occupational sector. That is, not only the apprentices' developing knowledge of the nature and range of work in media production, but also their awareness of the contract-based/freelance nature of media production. Secondly, we address the related issue of the development of social capital to operate as freelance workers in the sector. Thirdly, we address learning in relation to the development of expertise and identity, drawing upon the notion of *the process of becoming* (Colley et al 2003: Hodkinson et al 2008) in the context of the apprenticeship in media production. Finally, we discuss the specific experience of learning in distributed and de-centred working conditions. It should be noted that the term 'Apps' is used in the following sections instead of Apprentices. This is the self-assigned collective noun used by the apprentices themselves which reflected what they saw as their distinctiveness – particularly at college. Described by one participant as a '*kind of badge of honour*', it produced an interesting play on the contemporary multi-media applications term in common usage.

**Occupational Knowledge and Skills**

The intention of the apprenticeship was to offer a range of placement opportunities so that apprentices might appreciate the diversity of roles in the sector and develop areas of

vocational expertise. This meant that the intermediary agency worked with the companies involved providing apprentices with a range of experiences which reflected the sector. Apprentices' experiences were not therefore bounded by what might be offered by one employer, as might be more commonplace in an AA.

Development of an awareness of not only the range of work possibilities but also the working process and employment conditions in media production was apparent from the initial focus group discussion and also from the interviews conducted with Apps in their work placements. In the first extract from Laura we see how an awareness of the occupational possibilities arises through the activities she engages in during an early work placement.

*Laura: during the first placement I had to interview someone who worked in the industry and I interviewed a woman [...] who did Radio Drama. And I'd never even considered Radio Drama, because I like Drama and Television, and I listen to the radio at night and that but I never really thought of it going together!*

In a subsequent interview conducted during a placement in television (entertainment) Laura outlined her appreciation of the multifaceted nature of the production process gleaned through her participation in the studio. She also conveyed the complexity of the working relationships involved in the production schedules:

*Laura : I went to Mastermind for my first [placement] and then I went back for my second placement, because during my first time it was just pre-production, and then when I went back for my second one I got to do filming [production].*

*Laura: I sat in the studio [...] and observed people, like what they do. [...] just watching it on the screen, and then [...] like from the gallery where you're watching all these screens and all different jobs that are going on around it. And you just don't realise how many different jobs there are and what goes into it...*

The following extracts from Izzi also illustrate her growing awareness of the sector through the range of work placements available in the apprenticeship. In the first extract Izzi talks about her first placement at a radio station and in the second extract her subsequent experiences in TV entertainment.

*Izzi: I worked at a radio station, I absolutely loved it, [...] I kind of liked the idea of the sound kind of thing, ..[...]*

Izzi (2<sup>nd</sup> placement) : *I was there (TV entertainment) for the 6 weeks it was on the pre-production side ..[...] We went down to London for like 2 days to do some auditions. .. When I was back at college, [...] they asked me to come in and help with the film days. So I've been at Granada Studios helping them this week, which has been amazing.*

Alongside the developing awareness of the range of opportunities open to them in media production, the Apps' developing understanding of the contract-based, freelance nature of employment in media production was clear from very early on in the apprenticeship. Acknowledgement of, commitment to and acceptance of the nature of the work in media production is compelling and apparent throughout the Apps' accounts of their experiences and there were few differences between the commitment expressed and either the gender or the age of the Apps. Where comparisons could be made by Luke, for example, who had worked previously in permanent employment conditions, there was rather more caution:

*Luke: It is quite daunting in a way because I used to work at [company's name]..It was a very structured job, it was like you know you get paid each month, you'd have four weeks holiday and that was it like throughout the year [...] it's still just a bit daunting this way of like the freelance mentality, that one minute you have a 3 month contract and then....[nothing]...*

Whilst a gendered and more socially divisive occupational trajectory may await the Apps post-apprenticeship, as the research of Fenwick (2008) in Canada and a Skillset (2010b) report into *Women and the Creative Media Industries* evidences, the Apps were not under any illusion about the working practices in the sector. The Apps' accounts demonstrate that the working practices of the sector are, simply, part and parcel of the experience in context.

At this stage in their working lives the acceptance might, perhaps, be expected. Apart from Luke, they had little previous work experiences to offer contrast. Additionally, they were surrounded by seasoned project workers who 'normalised' the employment practices. The only co-workers apprentices had contact with were contracted to projects; they were not out of work. Nevertheless, when questioned further about employment practices, the Apps commented on the kind of working life to which they were being inducted.

*Izzi : the thing I've learnt about this industry is that you can't do it if you don't enjoy it. You can't put that much effort into it without getting some sort of like reward out of it, because it's just too much, it is. But you know it's not like a **normal 9 to 5**.*

*Michelle : ...I've been kept so busy here, that I kind of haven't really had the time to have a social life. But I don't mind that. I like to keep busy, I like working all the time, so that's been really good*

To take on respective media production identities required a re-balancing in their personal life. This re-balancing may not be so easily achieved nor desirable for workers with family commitments, for example. And, whilst most of the case study apprentices lived at home with family, their socio-economic backgrounds meant that they were expected to contribute to household finances. One apprentice, Raggy, reported that he handed his entire wage over to his mother so she could pay household bills. Nevertheless, the rewards, as the Apps saw them, can be illustrated by Izzi's satisfaction at 'being recognised' for her work in drama:

*Izzi : I've got my name on the credits ... as 'Office Production Trainee'. I was really pleased with that.[...] I am really excited to see it actually. I went to a screening of it a few weeks ago just to see the first episode, and it's good. I like that, I love like working through it and then just seeing the end product.*

If anything, this early awareness of conditions propelled them into adopting the future employment strategies that their media production colleagues exhibited from quite early on in the apprenticeship. The ways in which they learned about and acted upon employment practices is taken up in the next section.

### **Developing social capital to work in the sector**

The media production apprenticeship was designed to reflect the character of the industry and, therefore, one of its explicit aims was the development of apprentices' social capital. As has been described, the potential to exercise agency was a key feature of the selection process. Nevertheless, it was striking to note that during the very first focus group meeting - just 5 months into the apprenticeship and after one placement- that *they* not only brought up the issue of developing social contacts through networking as part and parcel of working



in media production, but also spoke about the ways in which they had begun to develop and actively use these connections.

The Apps were asked what they thought was the one thing that they would like to make sure happens in the second placement. Raggy and Izzie's responses are illustrative:

*Raggy : That would be making connections straight away. Making friends with everyone, making friends and making sure that [they know you].. but that's all.*

*Izzi : For me [..].. you just kind of get to know people, you know, chatting with them ask if they needed any help or anything, you know, just kind of getting down and doing my work but still like meeting people and things like that really.*

This awareness about how successful networking was central to securing work opportunities surfaced again and again in the interviews throughout the placements.

Irrespective of the specific work context, the recognition remained. Moreover, this awareness was actually *used* (from quite early on in the apprenticeship) to direct action – to make things happen. In the following extract we see how Raggy describes how he developed relationships whilst on placements which gave him advance warning of the openings and opportunities from which he could take advantage. Indeed from the very first placement, Raggy used this knowledge to negotiate a promising placement on the film set of the Manchester-based TV drama: *Shameless*.

*Raggy : 'I found out that most people were going on to Shameless.. [...] and I asked (placement organiser) if there was a place at Shameless and he said they'd get in touch with me. ..they'd put in a word for me ...and then I went for an interview . [The Producer] wasn't all that keen on taking people on but he's really quite interested in me and I was really eager so he said he would take me on...*

Throughout the placement interviews the Apps discussed the on-going use of the networks they had developed. In the following extract Laura reflects on the use of connections to secure her last placement, back with BBC, while Luke sees his last placement back at the BBC as offering the 'exit' opportunities he needed.

*Laura: I got that [placement] because one of the women who is the talent coordinator. I kept in contact with her - which is quite good because everyone says you need to make contacts for everything - so I got that mostly through her saying*

*“oh you’ve been here quite a lot, we’d definitely have you back for another one so if you want to....”*

*Luke : Yeah, should be good [the 4<sup>th</sup> placement back at BBC]. I mean being back in that building as well, because I know a lot of people from my first placement, it will be good to talk to them and [...] just say like “I finish in April, what should I do” or “where should I go or who should I ask to do things” and stuff.<sup>4</sup>*

The development of social capital as a specific outcome of the media production apprenticeship is also captured in the following extract from the final interview with Michelle. Having grown up in London, and with family still living in the capital, Michelle secured her final placement at Children’s BBC, London. In the following extract she talks about life beyond the apprenticeship back in Manchester, which also coincided with the move of Children’s BBC to Media City, Manchester.

*Michelle: It’s been really good being here (London) as well because they have contacts with the people that are going up to Media City, so [manager’s name] set up an interview for me with [someone] who is going over to Media City, and I’ve e-mailed different contacts that I’ve made and kind of said “what’s your advice, what’s the next best thing for me?”.*

In summary, the Apps’ accounts confirm their developing knowledge of media production, not only in terms of the range of job roles and the possible career routes, but also the recognition of the distinctiveness of the sector and its working practices. The organisation of the apprenticeship with block work placements in different sectors of media production did much to facilitate this situated learning. In their respective work placements the Apps gained full insight into the working environment: their contextual knowledge was apparent, not only from the awareness they shared about media production but also in the practices they adopted as the placements were negotiated. The apprenticeship can therefore be seen as actively acculturating the Apps, as Chan (2013:377) has also observed in her study of

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<sup>4</sup> Luke was offered a contract position following -on from his final work placement

apprentice Bakers, '*...to the specialised approaches to work as epitomised in their workplaces*'.

Moreover, it is important to highlight the significance of agency in the Apps' growing awareness of the sector and its working practices. From the initial process of selection to the experience of workplaces, the Apps had to take action, not only in the negotiation of work placements, but also in creating and using contacts and engaging in networks. Over the course of the research, the case study Apps not only made contacts and therefore developed the social capital required but, as the selected quotations confirm, they developed the confidence to use these contacts to negotiate their respective learning journeys. This does not mean to say that the Apps were all equally comfortable with making contacts and using them right from the start of the apprenticeship. We have shown how Raggy, for instance, was prepared to argue forcefully for a placement with '*Shameless*' at the beginning of the apprenticeship, while others like Izzy recognised that she developed the confidence to use these contacts once she experienced successful experiences in workplaces.

### **Expertise and identity**

As has been shown, the nature of the production process, coupled with the intensification of the work process in the industry was not lost on the Apps. In the extracts that follow, we see how the possibilities of particular occupational identities within media production connect with the process of becoming. The first extract, from Raggy, illustrates how his initial thoughts about being a director are honed in conversation with project members to include the prospect of specialising in work at technician level in 'sound'. In the second extract, from an interview conducted on the film set of the TV drama '*Shameless*', we see how his focus, following experiences on the film set, has been drawn to camera operation:

*Raggy (after 1<sup>st</sup> placement) I wanted to be a director in my career but like I spoke to [someone at 1<sup>st</sup> placement] and he said if there's any sound placements [go for it] ...And even though I wanted to be a director ... I think it's important to work in all fields.*

*Raggy (3<sup>rd</sup> Placement) : this is just all the camera department basically and [although]I weren't really interested in being a camera operator, now I've been*

*working here for two weeks I know like camera operator is something that I want to do in the future.<sup>5</sup>*

Similarly, in the first extract from Laura, we see how her decision-making regarding her final placement is influenced by the expertise of other team members as well her own reflections on the scope of her knowledge and practice thus far. She first talks about what she was going to choose (a runner on a popular comedy programme) and then why she decides against this:

*Laura: I'm going to do a 'History of Real Britain' for my final placement which is like looking at archives but doing interviews as well, which I'm really interested in. I think it will be dead good. [...] ..I was going to do this comedy programme but for me it's kind of similar to my last placement in terms of it's just doing runner stuff."*

*Int: how did you make the decision?*

*Laura: [a production team member] knew that I've done my other placements there [entertainment] ...she knows what I've covered and what I've not, so she said "it would be good for you on your CV and everything if you did archives, because you've not done archives and you've not done interviews".*

For Izzi, her growing awareness of the possibilities open to her on the apprenticeship is expressed after the experience of first placement. By the third placement, we can see her articulating the differences between types of production contexts and how she might position herself within these contexts:

*Izzi : (after first placement) Radio was, like, my first placement. I just think it's just with the opportunities still coming I think it's too early to kind of say "my heart is set on that although I've always wanted to do it", that kind of thing.....*

*Izzi: (third placement) It's got to be drama, yeah definitely; I've been converted! ...when I to go back to college they go on to period stuff, so it's going to be 1931....And it is going to be like you're going to be stepping into another world [...]*

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<sup>5</sup> Raggy was offered a trainee camera position with the production company following the placement.

The process of becoming and the development of an occupational identity is a central aspect of apprentice learning and enables them to realise what makes them ‘...the right person for the job’. (Colley et al, 2003:488). For Colley et al, this ‘vocational habitus’ sees the learner as aspiring to ‘a certain combination of dispositions demanded by the vocational culture’ (ibid). In the media production apprenticeship the process of becoming can be seen as more fractured, given that the apprenticeship is not bounded by the requirements of one occupational pathway or by the single employment context. As the extracts have illustrated, whilst the possibilities of developing a range of occupational identities mean that apprentices are aware of the range of specialisations, focussing in on a specific area is dependent on placement opportunities and achieving the appropriate balance between breadth and depth of experience. Nevertheless, the process reflects exposure to the specific distributed and de-centred working conditions of production. The next section discusses some of these issues further and identifies how apprentices learned in these conditions.

### **Learning in distributed and de-centred working conditions**

In explaining the media production working context earlier in this paper, we referred to Boltanski and Chiapello’s (2005) ‘*project working*’ to summarise the shift from full-time employment to the contract conditions of employment exemplified in media production. Working under these conditions demands, as Boltanski and Chiapello argue, not only a particular type of engagement, but also presupposes team working where membership of teams involves a changing mix of technical and managerial personnel. In contrast to Fordist and Taylorist principles categorising the management of work, in project working conditions co-ordination and management of a project tends to be shared between team members who bring their respective areas of expertise together to drive the project (Boltanski and Chiapello,2005; Deuze, 2007).

This engagement in multi-faceted project teams is reflected in all the accounts given by the Apps. In multi-faceted project teams expertise is devolved, reflecting the specialisms required to get the job done, rather than any hierarchically organised structure. The learning context therefore contrasts with the characterisation of apprentices’ learning in

relatively fixed and well-bounded vocational communities (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Sennett, 2008).

How this actually impacts on Apps' learning can be seen most clearly in Raggy's account, below, from an interview conducted just two weeks into an eight week placement on the 'Shameless' TV drama set. In the first extract Raggy considers where he started from on the set and how his knowledge and practice has developed:

*Raggy: On the first day there wasn't that much for me to do because I didn't know what to do, and I just found out myself; the more you know the more you find what to do...[....] [but now]there's so many things that I've picked up on that I've not even asked questions about but I know the answer to already because it's just sunk in, you know, from hearing various people speak about it.*

In the next extract, the importance of the multifaceted team is introduced: camera crew; sound; director etc. And we can see how the team-working influences his learning experience:

*Raggy : [I am] thankful to being with [3x names] because they're such great mentors....and they've said that they're quite proud of me because I've walked on to the set and that for 2 weeks and it feels like I've been here for years because I gelled in well with them and stuff like that.*

*Q: So, are you allocated to a person in charge of one job and then another?*

*Raggy: It happens more naturally than that I would say. I mean [name] will say obviously "I want you to be learning this [...] I would like you to be here", but they also let you choose yourself. Like if I said to [name] today, If I wasn't comfortable enough to do the clapper board [...] he would actually make me do the clapper board!....[.]*

Given the nature of the project work – organised around the filming of a scene, for example, or a live radio broadcast - the project teams reflect multi-faceted vocational communities. This means that vocational practices are co-ordinated i.e. skills are learned and knowledge acquired in the midst of cultural practices. In this sense the Apps were not only 'positioned' (Holland *et al.* 1998) but constantly 're-positioned' as they stepped into and out of their different contexts with a range of experts (Guile and Lahiff, 2012).

However, rather than having to learn a whole new set of practices each time they moved work placements, the Apps can be seen to revisit knowledge, whether aesthetic, procedural, and/or technical. Development of knowledge and expertise was therefore in accordance with

the needs of the task-in-hand, rather than in accordance with the how such knowledge had been learned originally or how they had deployed that knowledge in previous working teams. In this respect, we see the Apps actively recontextualising knowledge (Guile, 2010).

To illustrate this recontextualisation, in the next extract Michelle not only speaks about her developing competence as a runner in her fourth placement (Children's BBC- entertainment), but also about how she drew upon knowledge gained in earlier placements particularly in costume (drama).

*Michelle: we were like in this abandoned castle in the middle of nowhere, which was really great fun, and I was a runner. But I was also dealing with props and costume as well, so I gained a hell of a lot out of that trip, because they didn't have [the person in charge of props] for the weekend that we were filming. And then there was no costume person so I was having to dress and clothe the [actors]*

*Q How did you feel about doing that?*

*Michelle: That was fun because I got to go to the fitting and help the woman pick out the clothes for it ...And I think my [earlier] costume experience really helped with that, so I kind of felt very comfortable going into it, which I'm sure helped them out as well.*

The process of recontextualisation described here is not, however, solitary and in the Apps' accounts we see examples of the ways in which their learning is actively mediated by others in the multiple project teams. The broader implications of this for other project-based contexts are that existing team members need to be prepared to take on this mediating role. In this pilot apprenticeship, because placements were negotiated and agreed by project/team leaders (as exemplified in the example of Raggy's negotiation of his placement with *Shameless*) there is an implicit expectation of support and encouragement. As Lahiff (2015) has shown in her discussion of workplace observations, where the object of activity is developmental and mediated, recontextualisation is more likely to be realised.

### **Ideal-typical Model of apprenticeship**

In the previous sections we have shown how the Apps worked as part of multifaceted project teams. As a consequence, we have argued that, in contrast to apprenticeships in traditional employment conditions, the Apps' learning journeys evidence a de-centred and distributed rather than linear model of learning. To conceptualise this model of learning, we

refer to an ideal-typical model that we reproduce here as a heuristic for others who design and/or research apprenticeships in similar project-working contexts. The criteria operationalised in the model are the: (i) purpose (or object) of apprenticeship; (ii) mode of access and status of apprenticeship; (iii) context of apprenticeship; (iv) process of learning; development of expertise and identity; and, (v) the outcome of learning. The following concepts – vocational practice, social capital, contests, recontextualisation – are used to illustrate what is distinctive about each of the above criteria of the model of learning (Guile and Lahiff, 2012).

**Table 2: Ideal typical presentation of the Model of Learning in the Apprenticeship in Media Production**

**[Insert Table 2]**

## **Conclusions**

We began by addressing the question as to whether apprenticeships are capable of innovation. Given the commitment of all stakeholders and the support of the sector-specific skills council, we have argued that the case study demonstrates the structural and organisational innovative capacity of apprenticeship. The media production apprenticeship emerged to address the future labour demands of local media production companies in the context of a project-based culture and employment practice. In this case study an intermediary agency acted as employer to surmount this initial challenge. As such it acted as principle co-ordinator of the learning experience of the apprentices, while placements were provided by a group of engaged employers. For the duration of the research, the collaborative ethos appeared to remain intact. However, as Leemann, and Imdorf (2015) have shown, the longevity of such collaborations depend on continuing and individual company returns from the resources invested in collaborative arrangements. In the research reported here, two out of the five apprentices were taken on as contract workers by companies involved in the apprenticeship. In the competitive market, employers might argue that they only accrue benefits once a trained apprentice had been employed by them. This has indeed been shown to be the case in the Swiss VET system (Leemann, and Imdorf, 2015). Nevertheless, as Leemann and Imdorf (2015) also acknowledge, the benefits for an apprentice from such



collaborative provision are more immediate. Being organised through a collaborative network in itself has the potential to offer a much broader knowledge of the occupational field. In terms of the 'afterlife' of the pilot, whilst elements of the media production apprenticeship remain, structurally and organisationally it was eventually converted into a company-specific apprenticeship for one of the major players in the collaboration.

In terms of learning from the apprenticeship in media production, our qualitative inquiry has shown how the apprentices developed not only occupational knowledge and skills, but also vocationally-specific social capital – a central, explicit aim driving the development of the apprenticeship. Specifically we illustrated the ways in which apprentices' on-going development of networks of contacts emerged as result of engagement in distributed, multi-faceted vocational communities. We have argued that these networks of contacts are critical in the sense that without these and the where-with-all needed to develop networks, apprentices cannot hope to develop occupational practices that will sustain them in the sector beyond the apprenticeship. We acknowledged the significance of the apprenticeship selection process in the development of social capital. This focussed on identifying apprentices who showed potential to exercise agency. We suggest that the process of selection for apprenticeships in project-based or multi-employer contexts may prove to be a key aspect of the success or otherwise of the intended learning. Certainly, for the case study apprentices, this proved to be the case. Alongside assuring a positive orientation towards their apprenticeship, the phased selection process also added value to the esteem of the apprenticeship for those who succeeded.

To complete the argument we have presented an ideal-typical model of learning in an apprenticeship in distributed, project-working conditions which we hope will be useful to others researching and/or designing apprenticeships in similar contexts.

In response to the challenge of the JVET special issue and in light of contemporary discussions in England, we would therefore add our voice to others who argue that an apprenticeship, when viewed as a model of learning-in-context, can respond innovatively to changing working contexts and offer a truly meaningful model of learning at work. We would, additionally, advocate recognition of the changing nature of working practices in understanding how learning might best be realised in apprenticeships in distributed, project-working conditions.

**Word Count : 8500**

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**Table 1 : Apprentices' Profile**

<b>Pseudo-Name</b>	<b>Male/Female</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Prior to Apprenticeship</b>
Laura	Female	17	School: GCSEs
Izzi	Female	17	School : Media Course
Luke	Male	21	Work : retail, music store
Raggy	Male	18	F.E College : B/Tec media course
Michelle	Female	20	F.E College : B/Tec media course

**Table 2: Ideal typical presentation of the Model of Learning in the Apprenticeship in Media Production**

Criteria for model of learning in apprenticeship	Model of learning
Object of apprenticeship	To develop apprentices' vocational practice (knowledge, skill & judgement) & social capital (networks) as freelancers for liquid life <sup>6</sup>
Mode of access and status	Multi-agency involvement in (i) recruitment to core course; & (ii) using "contest" to suitability for apprenticeship.  Employed status with training provider for two years
Context of apprenticeship	Educational context – block placements in FE college.  Work context – multiple project teams & distributed locations
Process of learning	Ongoing recontextualisation of:  - forms of knowing & judging - vocational identity  and on-going development of:  - networks of contacts  in distributed multi-faceted vocational communities
Development of expertise and identity	Multiple transitions from one:  · de-centred and distributed project team to another · mode of recontextualisation to another starting position (placement/runner) to contract-based employment
Outcome of apprenticeship	Vocationally-eclectic practice; Social capital and vocational identity.

<sup>6</sup> We use Deuze's (2007) twist on Bauman's (2005) original use of the term and extend it to capture apprentices' challenge to work and learn in de-centred and distributed working conditions.