

Dr Pauline Couper, Dr Colin Dawson, Sue Lea and Lisa Spencer

pcouper@marjon.ac.uk

### 'Learning to sing together': developing a community of research practice through dialogue

#### Academic biographies

Dr Pauline Couper is University College Research Officer and Senior Lecturer in Geography at University College Plymouth St Mark & St John (UCP Marjon).

Dr. Colin Dawson is Head of Social Studies at UCP Marjon. He is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology, and was Dean of School between 1995 and 1997.

Sue Lea joined UCP Marjon in 1999. She is a Senior Lecturer in Youth and Community Work, and Head of Early Years, Children and Families.

Lisa Spencer is a Senior Lecturer and Programme Leader for the BA (Hons) Community Work and BA (Hons) Community Practice. She joined UCP Marjon in 2006 following community and mental health practice.

#### Abstract

*This paper explores the processes involved when a group of academics within a small teaching-led institution set out to build a community of research practice. Through a narrative account that gives voice to each member of the group, the paper depicts the dialogic processes by which members of the group explored their current academic identities, in a search for new research identities. In establishing a community of research practice the group were able, through dialogue, to move away from hierarchical conceptions of 'novice' and 'experienced researcher' towards a 'mutuality' which set aside hierarchical power relations. In this way the authors add their collective voice to recent challenges to the dominant discourse of academic knowledge production. The paper concludes by arguing for the need to have such communities of research practice in order to facilitate the time and/or space for meaningful, transformative*

*dialogue, at a time of increasing demands upon academic staff.*

**Keywords:** Researcher development; academic identity; dialogue; communities of practice

#### Introduction

The expansion of Higher Education (HE) in the UK in recent decades has arguably necessitated the development of new academic and professional identities on a number of levels. Many institutions have gained University, or University College status, and have redefined themselves as part of that process. For many this redefinition has involved an increased focus on research related activity coupled with an increased emphasis on employer engagement following the Leitch review of the UK's long-term skills needs (Leitch, 2006). The growth in academic programmes where practice-based knowledge production is the norm has led to individuals entering academic employment from a range of professional backgrounds, sometimes without prior experience of the 'detached' knowledge production more traditionally associated with academic institutions. Yet despite the changes taking place within HE, the development of academic identities has been identified as an under-researched area (Lee and Boud, 2002) and in particular the processes of researcher development (as opposed to teacher development) are little understood (Åkerlind, 2008). This paper explores the processes involved when a group of academics within a small teaching-led institution set out to build a community of research practice. It explores the different trajectories, issues and experiences of each of the participants as they committed themselves to engaging in dialogue in order to build a new inter-disciplinary research culture within the institution.

Our intention here is to provide an account of the development of the group and its individual members, but to do so in a way that depicts the dialogic process by which

the group has been operating. We do this by providing a narrative account that gives voice to each member of the group (as did Mrs Kinpaisby, 2008), but does so both textually and visually, through the organisation of text on the page. The ebb and flow of dialogue, and the importance of honouring a space where trust and respect could grow and thrive, are therefore more explicitly portrayed. In this way, we add our collective voice to recent challenges to the dominant discourse of academia, a discourse that prioritises the 'disembodied expert voice', rather than openly acknowledging the constructive potential of dialogue. By making explicit the presence of multiple voices in our work, we seek to expose the importance of dialogue and the presence of multiple voices in all academic knowledge production. We extend the challenges we faced in our work by developing our multiple authorial voices. The power of publishers and editors to control the conventional presentation of academic work is acknowledged and our hope lies in the anticipation that a new journal might consider new forms of academic expression. In acknowledging that our portrayal of the narrative does not conform to the rules normally prescribed we ask editors, and you the reader, to think beyond such normal strictures in order to allow our individual and group identities to emerge more fully. In shared reflection upon our experiences our analysis is grounded with reference to Buber's (1947) understanding of dialogue and community and Lave & Wenger's (1991) work on communities of practice which we apply in order to more fully understand the development of academic and research identity and culture.

The narrative provided below is not a record of a single conversation. Rather, it is a collective account that has been carefully constructed in an attempt to capture the essence of a developmental process that has been ongoing since October 2006. We use disembodied

(unattributed) text to provide some simple description of the group's activities throughout, and use our own voices to convey some of the personal experiences that accompanied these activities. Here we have drawn on the conversations and writings through which we reflected upon our collective and individual experiences, as well as on our on-going dialogue (written and oral) regarding the nature and purpose of Higher Education, on 'truth' and on 'justice'. It is important to note that the positions reflected in the contributions of each participant were not necessarily left unchallenged during discussions, but they are presented here as 'snapshots' of an on-going dialogic process, in which (as our analysis suggests) acknowledgement of the subjectivities of each member of the group at different times was central. We must also acknowledge the absence of a fifth member of the group, who fully participated in the activities of the group before moving to another institution in August 2008. This, then, is a partial account in many respects. The group comprised:

SL: An experienced community educator and lecturer with a social policy background, but an inexperienced researcher.

PC: A Geographer who completed a PhD before becoming a lecturer and who had previously published, and was the School Research Co-ordinator when the group first began to meet, later becoming University College Research Officer.

LS: An experienced community and mental health practitioner, new to Higher Education, with a background in psychology with some practitioner research experience, but unpublished.

CD: An experienced lecturer in Sociology, holding a PhD and working as Dean of School at the time the group first met.

\*\*\*\*\*

### The narrative

In 2005 a meeting was held in the School of Society, Environment and Culture. Pauline Couper, Research Co-ordinator for the School, gave a presentation on the 'SandRA' model<sup>1</sup> that had been developed to reflect a new approach to research within the institution. Staff were impressed by its inclusive nature.

CD: As the then Dean of the School, I thought that this was a very useful development. Academic staff who were considered not to be research active in terms of the Research Assessment Exercise could be seen to be research active in terms of the SandRA model. Staff who were teaching- focused could have the enormous amount of scholarly activity that they were undertaking recognised as valid by the SandRA model.

1

PC – I know not everyone felt so positive though. I was aware that some individuals who were the most established in research saw this as a move away from 'proper' academic research – although it was never intended as that. Rather, we wanted to make it clear that the institution values *all* scholarly and research activity as it underpins teaching. But perhaps this inclusivity threatened their position as the 'elite'.

2

SL – I was overwhelmingly relieved. At last there was a possibility that my focus on improving my own teaching practice had a home in a research framework.

3

My 'research' would no longer be invisible.

In July 2006, the school's 'scholarly exchange' meeting provided an opportunity for some members of staff to give short presentations about an issue of 'scholarly interest'. Towards the end of this meeting, the possibility was mooted of writing a book collaboratively within the School. Meetings were held to discuss this project further.

PC – For me (as research co-ordinator) running these meetings presented quite a challenge, in terms of how to create conditions in which everyone felt free to contribute ideas without fear of rejection, in the hope that a workable idea would eventually emerge.

4

At first there was quite a large group - some experienced researchers, and some who were novices.

PC – But isn't that division too simplistic?

5

SL - Not for me. My background in practice meant I had never undertaken a higher degree. The opportunity to claim 'novice researcher' status was important, so that when I sat in a research group where people had undertaken PhDs, I was liberated from the assumption that I 'knew' about research.

6

CD – As Dean, I thought this mix of experiences was a good thing. I believed that the more experienced researchers could mentor and encourage the less experienced ones.

7

- PC – Some would argue against that idea of mentoring though. I know some staff who have many years of experience in HE but no research profile saw mentoring as implying they were ‘deficient’ in some way, rather than acknowledging their professional expertise and treating them as equals. 8
- LS – The reality for me was I was a complete novice – to everything. So to be honest I was going along with the flow – going to things people suggest I do rather than making any decisions about staying myself. 9
- The group began by meeting during the working day and about a dozen people attended. The aim was to initiate a collaborative research project across the subjects of our very disparate school, ultimately to produce a multi-disciplinary text. The conversations within these meetings highlighted the potential for interdisciplinarity, but a single, coherent project never fully emerged.
- PC – This was a difficult time, in part I think because some people were trying to impose their own agendas on the group. 10
- LS – Having joined the group late, I was still struggling to really understand what was going on – I guess I was still new and trying to work my way round systems and relationships. I did feel as though I wanted to come up with some fab idea that would impress and include everyone as I was struggling to see how we could have a coherent text. 11
- PC – And yet that kind of competitive environment, the need to impress, was exactly what I was trying to avoid. 12
- SL – My concerns were different. During this time the struggle to find a research voice was crippling me. I believed research was a linear, meaningless, oppressive academic tradition: more concerned about what can and can’t be said: who can say it: how it can be said. 13
- CD – It was clear that there was a wide variety of different views on what we should be doing, and I realised that this was going to be difficult to manage. To be inclusive about research is a laudable aim, but this presents practical difficulties in trying to steer a large group towards a common goal. 14
- SL – Yes it felt to me like we were being ripped apart by academic allegiances and profound value differences about what counted as research. There had been lots of arguments about different research paradigms, with people trying to colonise the research agenda. Practitioner Research was low down the pecking order!!! 15

PC – But it wasn't supposed to be! That was the whole point of SandRA and the new research strategy, that all forms of research were embraced. 16

LS – I was very naive about the realities of research, and having come into higher education I thought that research would just 'happen' – I'd come to this group and we would just write a book – and I thought that being in HE would somehow legitimise whatever research I did. At this point it started to dawn on me that this wasn't true. It was listening to the conversations that started to happen that made me realise this. 17

For various reasons the numbers dwindled, and the difficulties of getting everyone together at the same time during the working day led us to begin meeting at 8.00am.

PC – This seemed important to the group at the time, the 'breakfast' meetings with our mugs of coffee and a packet of croissants. This was 'our time'. 18

The group became smaller week by week, and when we returned after the summer break in 2007 there was a core group of five people who continued to meet.

CD – Perhaps we just forgot to leave! However, I think the reduction in the size of the group made it easier to focus on areas of common interest, although I felt we still lacked a clear sense of purpose. Why were we doing this? I still had this feeling that we ought to be working towards publication, but we didn't seem to be getting anywhere. 19

At one of our early meetings, discussion turned to our own experience and expectations of Higher Education. We began a series of writing exercises focusing on values such as 'truth and justice' and addressing issues of 'dissonance'. These were offered in short contributions of about 100 words, with no other prescriptions about format. The meetings were used to discuss the work that was written during the previous week.

LS – This was a bit of a turning point for me. The previous week I had suggested exploring our commonality, which to me was learning and teaching in HE. However, this was lost as it was seen as having been 'done to death'. I missed the next meeting and was informed it was suggested we write 100 words on the meaning of truth and justice in relation to HE. I became frustrated with this because I couldn't see how this differed from my suggestion. However, I was pleased we had found some commonality and I really felt comfortable in the group as it quickly became clear to me we were the five that were in it for a bit of a long haul. Writing about truth and justice and then dissonance was quite interesting for me. 20

PC – I sometimes wondered how and why we ended up with these 21

topics! I definitely felt a disciplinary disadvantage here: as a physical geographer I don't have the academic grounding in issues such as justice that the rest of you do. Having said that, it was very interesting, and it became a process of self-discovery for me, as I began to articulate my own assumptions regarding HE and learn more about where they may have come from.

SL – I was 'given permission' to write free from academic conventions, so I wrote. The idea of free-writing in short bursts appealed to me. I could have been asked to write about anything at this stage. I wrote about my own experience but still covered my heartfelt need to find my 'voice' with academic references. I wrote: "Like bell hooks<sup>2</sup> I grew up when 'to speak when one was not spoken to was an act of courage'. Social justice requires freedom of speech - how ironic then that systems of production of knowledge within academia are based on silencing certain ways of speaking and certain voices."

22

CD – Although at this time I found it difficult to find the time to write, the discussions we had in the meetings were really thought provoking. Issues of social justice were intermingled with some interesting discussions about contemporary higher education policy. The perceived 'vocationalism' in recent HE policy appeared to be challenging the traditional values of higher education, and this raised a number of questions surrounding the future of a small Anglican University College.

23

During this time we became less preoccupied with trying to identify a 'product', and more engaged with the process of sharing and discussing our understandings of the meanings and purposes of higher education both for society at large and for us as individuals. Very gradually a new focus for the group emerged.

SL – I started to find my voice during this period. The pieces we wrote allowed me to speak authentically free from the constraints of product or judgement.

24

LS – I felt a change too. I had finally turned the tide of my overwhelming feelings of inadequacy around – I really did start to believe that I could write and that I would have something meaningful to say. As a woman (and I absolutely believe this is because of gender) I really struggle with the idea that I might be good at something and that I might have something meaningful to say. For me it's a series of steps I need to go through often accompanied by quite a long drawn out process – of gaining that self belief. The one thing I do know though is that I can gain the self belief in the right environment – and I guess that is something the group has given me in relation to writing – that environment.

25

The possibility of presenting at an institutional conference prompted the group to reflect on its own processes, and so the writing task for one Thursday morning breakfast meeting was to produce a personal, reflective account of the group's working. This was dependent on the truth-telling that had been developed during the meetings. The resulting breakfast was the first for which every group member had written.

PC – The fact that we had all written perhaps reflects the commitment 26  
to the group that we all share, & the trust that had developed  
between us by this time.

LS - But I found this a bit more difficult – I again reverted back to theory. 27  
Maybe I still felt as though I had something to prove. Maybe because I felt  
that I couldn't 'match' in any way Sue's eloquent words I had to somehow do  
something different. I'm not sure if this was competition or was it because I  
couldn't (or even didn't want to) compete? It also clearly linked for me with  
a Masters module I was writing on interprofessional collaboration and I  
wanted to try to capture some of the process to use in my teaching.

It was also the first time our writing had been completely reflective, and this produced some tensions.

CD – By this time, I had become confused about the purpose of the group. 28  
We had had some really interesting early morning discussions about  
research and other academic work, but there had been nothing in terms of  
traditional research output. In the early days, the much larger group had  
ideas about producing a book; yet we were no closer to producing even an  
article. I felt this was a low point for the group, and I seriously considered  
leaving. However, I had developed such an affinity and respect for the  
individual members of the group, which reinforced my commitment to it.

PC – I was really pissed off! The group claimed to be working outside 29  
of the institution's attempts to foster research. Had you forgotten  
how we started? I could only wonder why it's always me that emails  
everyone, books a room, buys the croissants etc. From my  
perspective it's a legacy of the fact that I was research co-ordinator  
for the school when we started. You also presented me with a  
significant conflict here: you were disparaging about institutional  
efforts to develop research, and claimed the group is rebelling against  
that, but those efforts are something I'm part of and absolutely  
committed to.

SL – By now I was on a roll as I spoke of the internal conflicts which were 30  
emerging for me. I wrote "How can we speak out about social justice and truth  
in the current policy climate? The academic mode of production contains

embedded within it a stage managed, monolithic research discourse, which censors voices *or by which voices are self-censored*. What is my own responsibility in this context? Do I remain silent, *or silenced by fear*? If dreams and Utopian visions no longer have currency in academia, and if they are excluded from the last bastion of social mission, the University Church College, who will speak of truth and social justice?" When I read Pauline's piece and reflected on it, I realised for the first time that it was my own fear that had silenced me – not the research strategy, not the University College, not my colleagues. I had effectively silenced my own voice. I went on to say "My work is not just about my intellect alone but is about blending my intellect with my spirituality, my life, and my very soul. Gibran says 'work is love made visible' but where are the spaces in academic life to honour this love? For me it is in my teaching, but like others I seek to express this in written form. My search to express this in my research and written work was a long and lonely journey until I found a small group of people who were willing to create the space and time to explore a new way of working together. So for now I sing in my morning choir – who knows – tomorrow I might just have the courage to sing solo."

This conflict has been productive as well as uncomfortable. Committing ourselves to a conference presentation gave us a clear focus to work on and resulted in our first collective 'output'. The resulting presentation was well-received by colleagues, and members of the group have gone on to write for publication and to present at international conferences individually.

\*\*\*\*\*

#### **Making sense of our experience: a community of research practice**

The concept of 'identity' is useful in understanding how educational subjectivities are constructed (Vincent, 2003). Hall (1993) points out that identities are not fixed, but are affected by history, culture and power. He argues that identities are names that we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. However, our experience demonstrates the ways in which the present and perceived future expectations also contribute to academic identity formation. Alongside efforts to encourage research, the institution was making clear an expectation that all academics should be engaged in scholarly and research activity. With our different prior experiences and

disciplinary backgrounds we each reacted to that expectation in different ways and the notion of 'being a researcher' held different implications for each of us. This is evident in the early stages of the group, when there appears to be some tension between PC's perceived need for 'equality' in dialogue and the desire to create an environment in which all felt free to contribute (§4), and the perceptions of other members of the group. SL was clear that the ability to claim 'novice' status was important to her (§6), while LS was struggling to find a 'research voice' (§20 & §21). Brew (2006) suggests that research has traditionally been the preserve of the 'elite' in the university system, and hence Lee and Boud (2003:197) describe a degree of "fear and anxiety accompanying often inflated notions of 'research', and ...[the academic's own]

inexperience". The same feelings appear to have been surfacing in the early stages of our experience. CD initially came to the group with the role of a middle manager and highlights the potential for mentoring in such a mixed group (§7), identifying the mixture of members' prior research experience as a positive attribute. It could be argued then, that these early conceptions of the group and the self-defined identities of individuals were dominated by a dualistic and hierarchical notion of 'novice' and 'experienced researcher'; members were either/or, with implications for the perceived status of each.

The transcript reveals a process of transition away from these hierarchically positioned identities to a recognition of equality in diversity among the group. This happened as preconceptions of research and how it should be approached were challenged (e.g. LS, §17; SL, §22 & §24), and members were pushed beyond their disciplinary comfort zones (PC, §21). It soon became apparent that all members of the group brought strengths and weaknesses with the potential to learn together. A contrast can be drawn here with Tynan and Garbut's (2007) experience of researcher development through collaboration. They both saw themselves as novice researchers when they began to work together and found equality in their lack of experience, whereas we found equality in the multiplicity of strengths that each member brought to the group. This is the 'mutuality' proposed as one of three key principles in Lee and Boud's (2003) discussion of writing groups; a mutuality where "hierarchic power relations are backgrounded" (195) and differences are accommodated within a common pursuit. Brew (2006) discusses such a mutuality in the context of disciplinary communities of practice (a notion we shall return to later), suggesting that:

Participants have to be 'allowing' in the sense of listening and respecting the contribution of others... participation needs to be equal... [not] equal in the sense of having equal skills and knowledge, clearly different members of any community will inevitably bring different

skills and knowledge, and at different levels... Equality here is about treating individuals as fully participatory human beings with things to contribute as well as learn.

Arguably such mutuality (or 'allowing') is possible only through dialogue. Genuine dialogue is defined by Buber (1947:37) as "where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself [sic] and them". Our shared commitment to this kind of dialogue was key to at least one of the novice researchers who had long rejected the notion of research built on "...the authorization of one's own texts by constant referential and often deferential citation of others" (in Harris 2006:13). In honouring our different understandings of the empirical world, the social world of norms and values and the subjective world of feelings (Grundy *op cit*), we were able to build a shared commitment to research and meaningful understanding which involved exploration of our truth claims, value judgements, and authenticity. Buber (1947:254) sees such dialogue as taking place not within each of the participants or around them, but "as it were in a dimension which is only accessible to them both" (or in our case, all). In this environment, built on trust and mutual respect, our tentative individual claims to validity could be tested, challenged and developed. While it is essential to test validity claims within external and impartial contexts, for all researchers this requires confidence but for the new researcher this requires an act of courage which should not be underestimated. To speak as a researcher in an academic arena where the tender shoots of understanding might be subjected to indiscriminate, academic crop-spraying, requires supreme confidence and academic resilience. The group provided the space to develop and build on those strengths.

Again drawing on Buber (1947), the collective dialogue that developed between us, and probably really only developed when the group was reduced to five, is closely

associated with the development of a community. Buber distinguishes between a community and a 'collectivity', the latter where individuals operate towards a common goal but the group is entirely defined and judged by that goal and performance against it. This he describes as "an organised atrophy of personal existence" (51), a functional assemblage requiring no real acknowledgement of the individuals therein. Community, by contrast, involves a "confirmation of life lived towards one another" (*op cit*), a testing of, but always recognition of, the person. Genuine dialogue is thus central to a community.

The existence of such communities within organisations (of which our group is one example) returns us to the notion of 'communities of practice'. Stemming from the influential work of Lave and Wenger (1991), this emphasises that individuals within organisations learn by being members of specific groups, with learning taking place through social interaction (Hughes *et al*, 2007). Research within higher education primarily focuses on existing communities of practice, examining their role in HE in general (Trowler and Knight, 2000), their function for new academic staff (Viskovic, 2006) and the dynamic between established and new members - 'old timers' and 'new timers' (Hodkinson, 2004; Gravett and Peterson, 2007; James, 2007). Some focus on the building of communities of practice through shaping, changing and developing existing mechanisms and relationships: Lucas (2007) follows Brew's (2006) notion of communities of scholarly knowledge-building practice, developing communities of practice in higher education which are inclusive of researchers, teaching staff and students, and Laksov *et al* (2008) explore the idea of developing a community of practice around teaching practice in a research-intensive department. The dialogue presented here provides some insight into the converse; the development of a community of research practice in a teaching-intensive institution. Although the members of the group started out in the same school, our different

subject bases meant we had little meaningful contact with each other prior to meeting, and this is therefore an entirely new community of practice. Academics have historically developed their academic identity through their disciplinary community, and so consideration of the development of entirely new communities of practice within HE is rare.

Wenger *et al* (2002) suggest that communities of practice can self-form, but that their potential is maximized if they are supported, encouraged and facilitated (in terms of time and resources) by their host organization. This draws attention to an interesting tension within the group. Meetings began with the direct support of the institution, being facilitated by the then School Research Co-ordinator and actively supported and attended by the Dean with responsibility for the School (although the roles of both have since changed). Yet in these early days the group was not a community of practice by Wenger's (1998) definition as, although it had a vague aim of producing a collaborative text, there was no real joint enterprise, mutual engagement or shared repertoire around which to focus the community. Neither was it a community in Buber's terms. The move to 'breakfast' meetings at 8am altered the perception of the group for four of the five members who now saw the meetings as being outside of the normal working day, and thus outside of the formal management structures and control of the organisation. Whilst this eventually led to some conflict (§26), the importance of this 'separation' of the group from the institution should not be underestimated. These breakfast meetings provided a space outside of the daily working routines of the individuals, but one that became regular. Thus 'normal patterns of business' were disrupted, which Lee and Boud (2003) argue is a key requirement for new patterns of normal business – and hence new academic identities – to be established. The communities of practice model has been criticized as not taking account of power differentials in higher education (Knight & Trowler, 2001;

Brew, 2006; Lucas, 2007; Jawitz, 2007), although Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998) and Wenger *et al* (2002) spend considerable effort focusing on new members of established communities of practice being 'on the periphery'. Our example, though, is of a new community of practice that was perceived by the majority of its members as being peripheral to the organization. It may be that very perception that allowed individuals within the group to feel ownership of the group's practice, thereby repositioning themselves in relation to research and developing their own researcher identities.

Arguably, this understanding of the group as peripheral to the organization relieved some of the pressure to be visibly 'productive' (i.e. producing an output) that may have otherwise been felt, although this is not to deny that there have been times when, collectively and individually, we have pressured ourselves to produce something (CD §29). But the lack of an immediate need to account for our time with outputs has allowed a considerable period to build relationships, and to build a constructively critical dialogue. It is this dialogue, with the mutuality, the 'allowing' of each others' being that real dialogue requires, that has enabled us to recognize, acknowledge, and learn from conflicts and tensions arising. As Buber (1947: 50-51) says, "The feeling of community...reigns where the fight that is fought takes place from the position of a community struggling for its own reality as a community." To some degree then, the group itself, this community of research practice, was our first product.

This understanding of our experience raises some difficult questions for both higher education policy and for the management of individual institutions. With the need for accountability of public funding and increasing demands on universities and academics relating to all aspects of academic life (teaching, research, knowledge transfer and community engagement, widening participation, fundraising) the time and/or space for meaningful,

transformative dialogue is easily lost. As governmental drives push us towards greater managerialist control, James (2007:140) argues that there are increasing pressures on academic identities:

The participation and identity formation of academics in Higher Education is being reconstructed in the context of the new managerialism and the economies of performance. A sense of meaning and identity is being generated within a space that is bounded and shaped by communities of practice that have, themselves, become co-opted vehicles of regulation and management of academics whilst ignoring values traditionally enshrined in academic practices.

In a rapidly changing world if we are to engage in transformative and emancipatory research we have first to find new ways of exercising our imaginations collectively, sharing our work collaboratively, and practicing democracy sensitively. If we fail to find a way to do this we run two risks. Firstly in disempowering ourselves as researchers and secondly in deepening the exclusion of the hidden voices and lived experiences which exist beyond the academy. As educational practitioners and researchers we now need to reflect on how normative judgements may merely reproduce the existing order (Whitehead & McNiff 2006:101). Denzin and Lincoln (2005:1124) call for a new framework for a 'reimagined social science' and Whitehead and McNiff (2006:161) claim the "greatest challenge for the academic educational research community is to question and destabilize their own hegemonizing discourses about their professional roles and responsibilities". Our experience of an initially disparate group developing a community of research practice based on mutual understanding and acknowledgement of each other as individuals demonstrates the importance of dialogue in challenging assumptions and enabling new possibilities to be realised.

<sup>1</sup> The 'SandRA' model is a diagram that visually depicts the core message of the institutional research strategy; that all

forms of Scholarly and Research Activity are valued as all inform learning and teaching. This equality of 'status' of different kinds of activity is depicted through concentric circles, with learning and teaching – the central focus of the institution – at the heart. The diagram, developed by Stoakes, Allmark, Ayre, Blakely, Couper and Wright, is presented and its uses discussed by Couper and Stoakes (2009, in preparation).

<sup>2</sup>bell hooks is a black feminist writer who chooses not to capitalise either of her names.

### Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to colleagues who took part in the early stages of the group, to those who listened to the conference presentation and entered into subsequent discussion, and most of all to Gaynor Pollard.

### References

- Åkerlind, G.S. (2008) 'An academic perspective on research and being a researcher: an integration of the literature', *Studies in Higher Education*, 33 (1): 17-31.
- Buber, M. (1947) *Between Man and Man*. London: Collins.
- Brew, A. (2006) *Research and Teaching Beyond the Divide*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Couper, P.R. & Stoakes, G. (in preparation) 'Introducing SandRA: visual representation of the research/teaching nexus as a tool in the dissemination of a new research strategy', in preparation to be submitted to *Higher Education Quarterly*.
- Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (2005) 'The Eighth and Ninth Moments – Qualitative Research in/and the Fractured Future', in Denzin, N.K & Lincoln, Y.S. (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.* London: Sage. 1115-1126.
- Gravett, S. & Petersen, N. (2007) "You just try to find your own way": the experience of newcomers to academia', *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 26 (2): 193-207.
- Grundy, S. (1996) 'Toward empowering leadership: the importance of imagining, in Zuber-Skerritt, O. (ed.), *New Directions in Action Research in Higher Education*. London: Routledge Falmer. 106-120.
- Hall, S. (1993) 'Cultural identity and diaspora', in Williams, P. & Chrisman, L. (eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Post Colonial Theory: A Reader*. London: Harvester. 222-237.
- Harris, D. (2006) 'Social theory and strategic communication', in Cope, J., Canaan, J.E & Harris, D. (eds.), *Learning and Teaching Social Theory*. C-Sap: University of Birmingham.
- Hodkinson, P. (2004) 'Research as form of work: expertise, community and methodological objectivity', *British Educational Research Journal*, 20 (1): 9-26.
- Hughes, J.; Jewson, N. & Unwin, L. (2007) 'Communities of Practice: A contested concept in flux', in Hughes, J., Jewson, N. & Unwin, L. (eds.), *Communities of Practice: Critical perspectives*. Abingdon: Routledge. 1-16.
- James, N. (2007) 'The learning trajectories of 'old-timers': academic identities and communities of practice in higher education', in Hughes, J., Jewson, N. & Unwin, L. (eds.), *Communities of Practice: Critical perspectives*. Abingdon: Routledge. 131-143.
- Jawitz, J. (2007) 'New academics negotiating communities of practice: learning to swim with the big fish', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 12 (2): 185-197.
- Knight, P.T. & Trowler, P. (2001) *Departmental Leadership in Higher Education*. Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.
- Laksov, K.B., Mann, S. & Dahlgren, L.O. (2008) 'Developing a community of practice around teaching: a case study', *Higher Education Research and Development*, 27 (2): 121-132.
- Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning: legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lee, A. & Boud, D. (2003) 'Writing groups, change and academic identity: research development as local practice', *Studies in Higher Education*, 28 (2): 187-200.
- Leitch, S. (2006) *Prosperity for All in the Global Economy – World Class Skills*. Norwich: HMSO.
- Lucas, L. (2007) 'Research and teaching work within university education departments: fragmentation or integration?' *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 31 (1): 17-29.
- mrs kinpaisby (2008) 'Taking stock of participatory geographies: envisioning the communiversity',

*Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers NS 33*  
(3): 292-299.

Trowler, P. & Knight, P.T. (2000) 'Coming to know in Higher Education: theorising faculty entry into new work contexts', *Higher Education Research and Development*, 19 (1): 27-42.

Tynan, B.R. & Garbett, D.L. (2007) 'Negotiating the university research culture: collaborative voices of new academics', *Higher Education Research & Development*, 26 (4): 411-424.

Vincent, C. (ed.), (2003) *Social Justice, Education and Identity*. London: Routledge – Falmer.

Viskovic, A. (2006) 'Becoming a Tertiary Teacher: learning in communities of practice', *Higher Education Research and Development*, 25 (4): 323-339.

Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice: learning meaning and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wenger, E., McDermott, R. & Snyder, W.M. (2002) *Cultivating Communities of Practice*. Boston: Harvard Business School.

Whitehead, J. & McNiff, J. (2006) *Action Research Living Theory*. London: Sage.