

Communities of Practice: An Heuristic for Workplace Reflection in Higher Education

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Abstract

This article aims to trigger discussion of the utility of Lave and Wenger's (1991) concepts of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) and Communities of Practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998) as heuristics for workbased reflection by higher education students. It considers the key role identity plays within a social theory of learning utilising Wenger's (2000) re-conceptualisation of Communities of Practice. More specifically the paper draws upon Wenger's (2000) conceptualisation of modes of belonging; engagement; alignment; and imagination; within communities of practice. The paper explores the application of these concepts and how students might use them heuristically to develop deeper analytical reflections of work based learning in higher education. It is further suggested that these reflections of workplace learning are aligned to Personal Development Planning and future employment. In reconceptualising informal work based learning and reflection through a lens of Communities of Practice students may be able to manage their learning experiences and emerging professional identities more effectively.

Keywords: work based learning; reflective practice; legitimate peripheral participation; employability; personal development planning

Introduction

The employability agenda within higher education has grown in the last two decades. Gaining a degree has been explicitly linked to future employment (Jarvis 2000; Ball 2004; Murphy 2005), leading to claims by some academics that some students may be less concerned with learning and more concerned about getting a degree (Marshall et al., 2014) or that ‘students are intent on increasing their credentials rather than their understanding’ (Coffield, 2000, p. 5). The repositioning of higher education around the employability discourse means that students must be able to demonstrate work-based as well as academic competence to potential employers (Moon 2004). Universities have long recognised their role in credentialising formal learning: however, there is growing recognition of the valuable ‘real-life’ lessons that are learnt through engaging with informal work-based experiences (Coffield 2000). This diffusion of learning, particularly through industry placements, means that universities are no longer the ‘traditional bastions of knowledge’ (Lea, 2005, p.180). The higher education curriculum is therefore concerned beyond the academic with issues of vocational and practice-based learning (Lea 2005).

The move towards consumerist notions of higher education has increasingly promoted ‘autonomy and individuality’ in student learning (Norton & Campbell, 2007, p. 140). The idea of an individualised approach to higher education was further cemented in neoliberal rationality from 2012 within the English higher education sector through the transfer of the full cost of tuition fees to students (Browne, 2010). As part of the process of individualising higher education, ‘reflection’ has become ubiquitous within the higher education curriculum. Dearing formally introduced the requirement for a ‘Progress File’, being ‘a means by which students can monitor, build and reflect upon their personal development’, into the higher education lexicon (NCIHE, 1997; Dearing, 1997). In 2001,

the Quality Assurance Agency formalised reflective practice within subject benchmark statements that further emphasised the perceived value of reflective learning within all subjects across higher education (Kilgour, Matthews & Crone 2014; QAA 2010; Moon, 2004b).

Moon (2004a) contends that reflection underpins higher education and employability, identifying the symbiotic relationships that exist between reflective practice, Personal Development Planning (PDP) and work-based experiences. The Quality Assurance Agency defines PDP as ‘a structured and supported process undertaken by a learner to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development’ (QAA, 2009). Thus, PDP is both a reflective and forward planning activity. More recently the Higher Education Achievement Report further reinforces the notion of reflecting and recording student achievement, primarily on the premise of supporting graduate employability (Burgess, 2011; Morris, 2013).

Problematising reflective practice

There are a number of reported and assumed benefits of reflective practice. It is suggested that reflection improves professional practice (Ferreira, Keliher, & Blomfield, 2013) and that through critical and analytical processes it enhances professional competence (Devonport & Lane, 2014). Learners are said to become more effective (Boud & Walker, 1998) and reflection is said to develop problem-solving competency, criticality and original thinking (Hussain, Mehmood, & Sultana, 2011). The perceived potential of reflective practice to students and in higher education is clear.

However, the experiences from the sector of student reflective practice are mixed. Work placements expose students to unfamiliar ‘real world’ situations where

learning is non-routine: this context contrasts significantly with their academic learning (Moon, 2004b). In the workplace there is no curriculum or academic texts to learn from (Moon 2001 and 2004b). Moon (2004a, p.65) considers work-based learning as 'chaotic', a situation that can be 'confusing for a learner who is used to being 'fed' information in lectures'.

There is clear evidence from practice that, given opportunities to learn through work-based experiences, students have difficulty in conceptualising and articulating learning. Academic colleagues express concerns regarding the superficial and instrumental approaches that students adopt and the lack of critical reflection on practice (Marshall, Nelson, Toner & Potrac 2014; Moon, 2004a, 2004b, Moon 2006; Trelfa & Telfer, 2014). Students are encouraged to engage with reflective practice to make sense of informal learning in the 'real world' and to consider the alignment of these experiences within the context of their PDP and future career. However, these are highly complex processes for inexperienced young people and the challenges they present are well recognised. An appraisal of both the framing and evaluation of learning through placements reveals limitations in the approaches that students take. As Moon (2006, p.59) comments:

'[reflective writing] is increasingly used as a means of accounting for and realizing learning in fieldwork, placements and work experiences. While it is generally recognized that students gain from the opportunity to engage in such experiences, the learning can be so varied and incoherent that it is difficult for the student to articulate it and apply it to other situations'.

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that the expectations of students' reflections are high. However, the benefits of reflective experiences on work-based learning might not be achieved as reflective writing for undergraduate students tends to be 'superficial, descriptive and probably doesn't lead to deep or comprehensive learning' (Moon, 2006, p. 36). Moon (2001) claims that reflective accounts from students often lack depth and

students tend not to reflect deeply about their professional behaviours and this is supported by Trelfa and Telfer (2014) who comment that students often do not see reflective practice as a tool for progression and growth.

Much reflective practice literature discusses stages of reflection, from superficial reflection to deep transformative learning (Moon 2001, 2004b, 2006; Trelfa & Telfer, 2014). However some students struggle to 'get' reflective practice. Models of reflection are often based on key events or 'critical incidents' but students often report that nothing happened to reflect on (Marshall *et al.* 2014; Trelfa & Telfer 2014). Furthermore the framing of reflective practice models around 'critical incidents' might obscure learning from more routine practice. The mundane or routine does not appear, to some students at least, to be fruitful for reflection.

Marshall *et al.* (2014) also identify the problem that students display an instrumental assessment driven approach. Occasionally it appears that students contrive to construct a cohesive narrative of an experience that neatly aligns with theory in order to achieve a high assessment grade. Since students link a 'good degree' classification to future employability they aim to achieve a good assessment result rather than focussing upon learning (Marshall *et al.*, 2014).

The occurrences of superficiality and instrumentalism do not mean that students cannot learn from work placements nor that students do not see the links between work placements and career development. Rather, it could be the limitations of the models of reflective practice within higher education, particularly the focus on critical incidents, that constrain deep reflection upon their experiences. Moon (2006) identifies many reflective practice models in use within higher education which present reflection within a practical rather than a theoretical framing. In some contexts, a practical approach is actively promoted (Somerville & Keeling, 2004). Moon (2006) suggests that some of

the more theoretical approaches designed to promote deep reflection are “not in general use in the class room, possibly because [they have] been too theoretical for direct use by learners” (Moon, 2006, p.40). However Kurt Lewin’s maxim that ‘there is nothing more practical than a good theory’ (Lewin cited by Wenger 2000, p.226) supports the pursuit of a theoretical approach that can be applied to work-based practice by students. Boud and Walker (1998) also identify the shortcomings of reflective practice that has no underpinning conceptual framework. The lack of a conceptual or theoretical framework through which students can reflect upon their experiential learning might explain why students’ reflective writing is often superficial.

There is a paradox, therefore, in the choice between practical models that students understand but that often result in superficial reflections, and theoretical models that promote deeper reflection but which are perceived to be beyond the ability of the majority of undergraduate students to apply. The challenge is to identify a theoretical perspective that is accessible to students which simultaneously provides a theoretical lens for students to critically understand informal learning.

Lea (2005) and Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson and Unwin (2005) identify the utility of Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concepts of Communities of Practice (CoP) and Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) to understand learning in higher education. This paper suggests that the CoP model offers an alternative approach to reflection that might be fruitful in considering learning through practice. It utilises the concepts of CoP, LLP and Wenger’s (2000) conception of modes of *belonging*, *engagement*, *imagination* and *alignment* heuristically to reconsider reflection on work-based experiences (Brown 2012a, 2012b) .

The utility of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger's (1998 and 2000) theorisation is highly congruent with informal learning as the concepts were developed through empirical research into informal practice-based learning. The application of LPP and CoP has been underdeveloped to date as a mode for students to reflect upon work-based experiences, PDP and their employability (Brown 2012a, 2012b). Using LLP and CoP to support student reflections may widen the repertoire of conceptual tools or theoretical lens that students can apply to develop their understanding of practice-based learning. This paper aims to trigger discussion around the heuristic utility of LLP and CoP theorisation to support student reflections on work-based learning. It is not to suggest that this approach is a panacea for the practical – theoretical dichotomy: rather, that it provides a mechanism for students to reconceive work based-learning and to develop deeper reflection on their work-based learning experiences.

Communities of Practice

There is a growing shift towards conceptualising learning as a socially constructed, negotiated form of socially situated practice as proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998; 2000). The major thrust of their theory of 'situated learning' is that knowledge is socially constituted and meaning is contested and negotiated within a community of practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991). A CoP is a "system of relationships between people, activities and the world; developing with time, and in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger 1991, p. 98). Practice is negotiated between individuals and the community and learning "is distributed among co-participants and not a one person act" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.15). Community of practice theorisation aligns with wider educational research in highlighting socio-cultural factors in learning and the false divide between formal and

informal learning (Erstad 2012). The related concept of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (LPP)

‘provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artefacts and communities of knowledge and practice. It concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice’ (Lave & Wenger 1991, p.29).

The notions of CoP and LPP provide a useful lens to critically reflect upon informal learning through work placements (Brown 2012a; 2012b). Students on placement can be conceived of as ‘newcomers’ interacting with ‘old-timers’ in a community of practice through their work-based learning experiences.

Wenger (1998) proposed *meaning, practice, community* and *identity* as key concepts within a social theory of learning and he was emphatic that they are all clearly interrelated and act upon one another in their totality within CoPs. Language is central to the social conception of learning: Wenger suggests that there is active negotiation between the individual and the CoP where the negotiation of meaning, learning and identity is constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed through an ongoing process of participation and reification, where participation ‘suggests both action and connection’ (Wenger 1998 p.55). In particular, Wenger emphasises the “profound connection between identity and practice” (Wenger, 1998, p.149). *Identity* acts as the bridge between agency and structure combining individual and structural divides (Cushion & Denstone, 2011). *Practice* is a total embodiment that overcomes traditional dichotomies dividing acting from knowing, manual from mental, or concrete from abstract (Wenger, 1998).

Originally in the presentation of his theory, Wenger gave primacy to ‘practice’, conceptualising meaning, community, learning, boundary, locality and knowing all in the context of practice (Wenger, 1998). Identity was a secondary focus. Interestingly, in 2000 Wenger repositioned the central thread of his theorisation. Now identity becomes a “key structuring element of how we know” (p. 238). It is through our identity that we

decide what matters and what does not, whom we identify with, whom we trust and with whom we share our understanding.

Lave and Wenger (1991) contend that learning and a sense of identity are inseparable in connecting competence and experience into a form of knowing:

“[Identity].. is not just an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming – to become a certain person or, conversely, to avoid becoming a certain person” (Wenger 1998, p. 215).

Learning across boundaries requires us to engage our identities to other ways of knowing in the world, as we all belong to different communities we experience ‘in a personal way’: as we negotiate our understanding across boundaries we consequently develop our identities (Wenger, 2000, p. 239). It will be suggested later that a focus on identity and modes of belonging through engagement, imagination, and alignment could have analytical utility for students’ reflections.

Community of Practice: Pedagogical strategy or heuristic device?

The term ‘community of practice’ has become shrouded with ambiguities (Cox, 2005). CoP is used loosely in many different contexts to the extent that it becomes almost meaningless and loses its conceptual purchase. The lack of clarity is unhelpful. Amin and Roberts (2006) argue for a more heterogenous lexicon to differentiate its use. Alheit (1999) contends that the concepts have been instrumentalised, exploited and reified as a pedagogical or knowledge management strategy (Amin & Roberts, 2006, Culver & Trudel, 2008, Fuller et al., 2005, McDermott & Snyder, 2002 Roberts, 2006, Wenger, 2000). In relation to reflective practice the term communities of practice rarely gets a passing mention. Occasionally the term is used loosely to provide a label of convenience to group reflection (Norton & Campbell, 2007; Knowles, Gilbourne, Cropley, & Dugdill, 2014).

In the original work, Lave and Wenger (1991) promoted their theorisation as an analytical viewpoint rather than a pedagogical strategy. However, at the beginning of the new millennium there was a clear shift in the articulation of Wenger's conceptualisation of communities of practice, from analysis towards application. Lea (2005) suggests that reference to CoPs has become ubiquitous in higher education and that most of the published literature is focused upon design and implementation rather than critique. She also suggests that Wenger's (1998, 2000) focus on the design of learning communities moves the concepts further away from the heuristic qualities of their original presentation. This contention that the move towards a pedagogical strategy diminishes the heuristic utility of Wenger's conceptualisation is interesting. Lea does not suggest an 'either- or': it is not the case that CoP has to be either a pedagogical strategy or a useful heuristic. CoP can be applied in both contexts; it just requires the author to provide clarity in the way in which the concepts are applied. It is possible to think with, and write with, the concepts as a set of theoretical constructions and consider the implications in a reflective and reflexive manner without essentialising or reifying the concepts.

This paper aims to strike a balance between applying the concepts heuristically to support thinking about the implications for work-based learning and considering how these insights frame implications for practice. CoP concepts are considered to provide an alternative perspective for students to think through, and reflect upon, their work-based experiences. Specifically the central concepts of engagement, imagination, and alignment are useful to students' reflections on and analysis of work-based learning. Introduction to this conceptual lens may provide opportunities for students to develop deeper, more profound reflections on their learning, to manage their placement experiences, and to consider their emerging professional identities through contacts with industry.

Work-based learning in higher education through the CoP lens

Framing work-based learning through the lens of CoP provides an alternative perspective for students to consider their work placement experiences. The concept of communities of practice suggests boundaries - of competence and identity (Wenger, 2000). A work placement can be conceptualised as a boundary encounter that provides direct exposure to professional industry practice: students may not always get fully immersed but they can negotiate the meaning of the boundary interaction in the context of their own practice. Organisations that accept students on work placements can be conceptualised as managing the peripheries of the community of practice to potential future members (Wenger, 2000).

In order to access communities of practice students will need to be perceived as legitimate peripheral participants. Legitimacy can take many forms: “being useful, being sponsored, being feared, being the right kind of person, having the right birth” (Wenger, 1998, p. 101). The university may provide students with legitimate peripheral access via work-based learning. Legitimacy could come from a combination of the reputation of the university, the title of the degree programme, professional relationships with academics or access to the professional discourse used within vocationally-orientated degree programmes. The student is positioned as ‘newcomer’ and the placement supervisor as the ‘old-timer’ within the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

A key issue for students to be aware of in work-based learning is not to expect full membership in a community of practice as full participation is a gradual process (Hodge, Wright, Barraket, Scott, Melville & Richardson 2011). It may be reassuring for students to understand the peripheral nature of their participation if this is framed in the context of the CoP/LPP model: peripherality is ‘normal’ and nothing ‘personal’. This perspective might help them manage their feelings, their relationships, and their

expectations on placement. Since the work placement may only be for a relatively short period of time students would remain as legitimate peripheral participants, never achieving the status of old-timer. However, without the facilitative effect of the university they might not have had the opportunity to participate at all. Of course they may wish to extend their placements in negotiation with the host organisation beyond the minimum required time stipulated by the university. If they choose to do this then they might have fuller participation which will enhance opportunities for learning and professional identity development.

As casual but legitimate members on the periphery students can explore boundaries to communities of practice without being subjected to the demands of full membership (Wenger, 1998):

‘There is something disquieting, humbling at times, yet exciting and attractive about such close encounters with the unknown, with the mystery of ‘otherness’: a chance to explore the edge of your competence, learn something entirely new, revisit your little truths, and perhaps expand your horizon’ (Wenger, 2000, p.233).

This type of boundary experience may be beyond what might be considered as the student’s ‘comfort zone’. Students therefore might need to be prepared for feelings of insecurity and being in situations in which they are not comfortable. Students might experience what Hodge *et al.* (2011, p.179) refer to as “uncomfortable reframing”. Feelings of peripherality can come from boundaries that surround communities of practice that denote a notion of belonging. We belong to some communities and not others, we know what it is to belong by what is familiar, and equally we know when we do not belong by what is unfamiliar, unusual or foreign (Wenger, 1998, 2000).

However, a newcomer’s perspective can be a useful position to learn from. CoPs, it is contended, are so familiar, informal and pervasive that they rarely come into explicit focus (Wenger, 1998). ‘Legitimate peripherality is important for developing

‘constructively naïve’ perspectives or questions. From this point of view, inexperience is an asset to be exploited’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.117). For students on work-based placements, the idea that their relative inexperience could be an asset might be both reassuring and empowering, helping them deal with the challenges of peripherality.

Identity and Modes of Belonging: Engagement; Imagination; Alignment

Communities of practice are sites for the interrelated coexistent work of engagement, alignment and imagination: “analytically each mode contributes [to] a different aspect of the formation of social learning systems and personal identities” (Wenger 2000, p.228).

For Wenger each mode of belonging requires a different form of social work:

engagement requires participation in joint activities; imagination may provide reflective distance but in doing so might reduce engagement; reflection might increase understanding about a community of practice and therefore help with alignment.

Engagement: For Wenger engagement in its simplest form is doing things together but this simplicity hides complexity:

‘the ways in which we engage with each other and the world profoundly shape our experience of who we are. We learn what we can do and how the world responds to our actions’ (Wenger, 2000, p.227).

In *mutual engagement* members engage in regular interactions with each other through practice (Wenger 1998). Relationships and group norms are established through members sharing together in *joint enterprise* (Wenger, 1998). Over a period of time members develop a *shared repertoire* of language, narratives, stories, artefacts and routines that are constantly being negotiated, and reified through participation in practice (Wenger, 1998).

Imagination: Wenger’s (2000) concept of imagination refers to how we construct an image of ourselves (our identity) in the communities we inhabit and how we orientate

ourselves within these. Imagination is manifested through the use of stories or artefacts in order to understand more abstract ideas. Imagination involves scenario planning and envisaging future possibilities about ourselves, our communities and our orientation within the world (Wenger, 2000). In considering their orientation in the world in the context of their history and aspirations students should consider an appropriate level of challenge on placement. If it is not challenging enough, learning might be limited; if the experience is too challenging and too far beyond their competence then equally little learning might take place (Wenger, 2000). Students should be encouraged to anticipate that they will be out of, or on the fringes of, their comfort zone, safe in the knowledge that these are rich opportunities for growth to be embraced for learning and professional identity development.

Alignment: Alignment for Wenger (2000) is about making sure we fit (in some sense) so that our activities “are sufficiently aligned with other processes so that they can be effective beyond our own engagement” (p. 228). Alignment is a two-way process and central to our identities, as it suggests both what we are and what we are not (Wenger, 2000). Students need to consider how they align, or not, within the community of practice for their work-based learning. Alignment is concerned with ‘fitting in’, or not, and students need to ensure that they make a sustained effort to understand the key issues within the workplace, and what makes it tick in order to operate within the group. Whilst no doubt most receiving work placements will offer a welcome and induction, their focus will remain on their practice. The student might be well served to take responsibility for their own ‘fit’ and this might be achieved through engagement in joint enterprise. Their alignment and learning opportunities might be enhanced through working with or alongside experienced colleagues. Legitimacy will be increased through doing something

that is seen as valuable and worthwhile. Students should also recognise that working alone or on individualised projects might limit their social learning on placement.

Identity can be an act of imagination that involves multi-membership and a trajectory in progress of history and aspiration (Wenger, 2000). There are clear links here with typical PDP activities imagining a future life or a career or possible multi-trajectories of a number of possible futures. With regards to professional development students might consider their emerging professional identity both as an act of imagination and alignment in terms of a 'trajectory', whether a vectored trajectory towards a specific career or looser trajectories towards a number of possible futures (Wenger, 2000). In this context acknowledgement of the highly spatial and temporal nature of practice-based knowledge and professional identity may help students to understand how they 'identify' themselves in different ways in different contexts.

There are potentialities for multiple identities. Students will not cease being students just because they are in the workplace, just as, for example, they do not cease being a sportsperson when they are not on the sports field. Students need to be sensitive to understanding what is valued, what is lauded and what is poor practice or inappropriate in the workplace. Being aware of the nuances can help them to manage their multiple identities, as what might be an acceptable discourse for students could be deemed unacceptable in the workplace.

Some communities of practice have boundaries that create barriers to participation with reified markers of membership, both explicit and more subtle and nuanced (Wenger, 1998): "the nuances and the jargon of a professional group distinguish the inside from the outside as much as do certificates" (1998, p.104). To overcome such issues, Wenger (2000) suggests that boundaries are considered in terms of coordination,

transparency and negotiability. He suggests that an intentional pedagogical strategy can be considered via individuals acting as brokers, or through boundary objects, including artefacts such as documents, processes and discourses (Wenger, 2000).

In the context of work-based learning, the university placement supervisor and work placement supervisor could be conceptualised as joint brokers with students to facilitate engagement. The project the students are engaged in and the placement paper work and learning outcomes set by the module/students could be considered as boundary artefacts, along with the discourses from academia and industry. In re-conceptualising work-based learning the brokering role of academics who supervise work based learning could be re-examined, conceptually or practically. More *active* brokering from academics might be a useful way to (re-)connect with industry, particularly on vocational programmes.

Lea (2005) suggests an examination of the way in which different language practices might contribute to marginalisation and exclusion as a form of alignment or misalignment with practice. It is worth considering how students already engage with a variety of idealised communities of practice. The dominant discourse and language used in an idealised 'academic CoP' or in higher education more generally within a 'student CoP' might both be very different from the language practice and discourse students experience within an 'industry CoP' through work-based learning. There are clear similarities with both Bourdieu (1984, 1986) and Bernstein's (1971) theorisation of language codes and their inclusionary or exclusionary effects. The notion of multi-membership of CoPs and the nature of language used in the 'academic CoP', the 'student CoP', and the 'industry CoP' suggests students will need to be conversant in three

separate language codes in order to gain legitimate peripheral or full participation in each.

In terms of professional identity, Lave and Wenger (1991) discuss the notion of professional “‘talk” in the validation of identity’ (Reybold, 2008, p. 140). Sfard and Prusak (2005) conceptualise this as the narrativisation of professional identity. The extent to which students use a variety of narratives about their identity might determine the extent to which they feel like ‘professionals’ or ‘students’ in different spatial and temporal contexts. In keeping with the social constructionist position of discourse, language is the most significant component of learning and identity construction. However Wenger (1998, p.53) notes that ‘the negotiation of meaning may involve language, but it is not limited to it’, since some forms of communication involve what is left ‘unsaid’.

The social work involved with alignment, imagination and engagement highlight the importance of social relationships. Wareing (2011:547) notes the heavy investment of ‘emotional labour’ involved in students convincing the placement supervisor they are ‘good students’. They may be better served investing such emotional labour in being perceived as a ‘good professional’, or at least a legitimate peripheral participant, so as not to be excluded as an intruder (Wenger, 1998). Students might want to consider how they engage with the informal, as well as the formal, structures in the workplace. For example, students could consider joining the team for tea breaks and lunch or social events if invited. Students might need to consider image management: their online footprint, how they communicate before placements via email and on the telephone and the first impressions they create in face-to-face meetings. They might think of the impression they create as negotiable with the host organisation in terms of the personal

and professional objectives the student sets themselves, or the focus of the project enquiry they undertake whilst on placement.

Communities of Practice and workbased learning – concluding thoughts

One of the appeals of the CoP model is that it highlights the heterogeneous nature of practice that is situated, spatially and temporally and in doing so it demonstrates that the model is highly applicable to all work-based learning experiences (Billett, 2001). The CoP lens offers heuristic value in assessing a wide variety of different work placements or organisational settings (Roberts, 2006) and is therefore not a sector-specific tool. It is a useful perspective when placements go well and equally if things do not go so well.

Critiques of the CoP model highlight that it does not explain well power dynamics nor how the learning of ‘old timers’ evolves (Amin & Roberts 2006; Fuller et al., 2005; Roberts, 2006). Wenger (1998) suggests, rather unsatisfactorily, that power is addressed through negotiated practice. Work-based learning modules inherently have a clear power dynamic built into the experience. Students’ legitimate peripheral participation is sanctioned by the organisation: insofar as they have ‘supervisors’ in the workplace and within higher education their relationships with ‘old timers’ in both contexts are subordinate. Old-timers’ learning in the context of work-based learning is not of concern. Thus any weakness of the model does not undermine its heuristic value in this context.

Work-based learning modules afford a form of legitimate participation for students. Using the concepts of CoP and LPP might help students consider the richness of the opportunities through work-based learning and enhance the value and visibility of non-formal learning both within and beyond the university. In embracing individualised

and personalised learning students should be able to recognise that learning can be context-specific but then personally applied to new contexts, either consciously or unconsciously. An open and growthful mind-set will maximise learning opportunities for students. Students also need to recognise that placement learning is to enhance understanding, not simply to complete required tasks. In developing understanding and meaning they will develop their professional identity and perceived competence (of themselves or by others). If they are simply task-orientated, or if their 'student identity' is extrinsically and instrumentally driven through an assessment mind-set rather than a learning mind-set, this learning might be missed.

CoP highlights the value of informal learning within practice. Since the focus is not upon 'critical incidents' as many models of reflective practice encourage, students can be alerted to learning that appears to be more routine. Through conscious reflection on tacit learning, issues not previously considered worthy of reflection may become explicit. It is also noteworthy to recognise that some learning may happen that is beyond consciousness, in the way Bourdieu conceptualises habitus for example (Bourdieu 1984, 1986). Universities could re-conceptualise (theoretically or in practice) interactions with workplace settings through the boundary dimensions of co-ordination, transparency, and negotiability where more 'active' brokering by placement supervisors might add value to the experience for students, academics and the workplace (Wenger, 2000; Galipeau & Trudel, 2006).

Students might be encouraged to consider the concept of LPP in a variety of contexts in their personal and professional lives. These insights might be of use to students when they work infrequently within organisations (Roberts 2006), work with new colleagues, change teams, change organisations or change careers. They might also help students manage transitions that are implicit through the neoliberal higher education

discourse of transferable skills and portfolio careers (Templer & Cawsey, 1999).

Students' awareness of the situational, spatial and temporal nature of competence and belonging might increase their resilience, insight, and self-confidence through transitions that cross perceived boundaries.

This paper does not aim to promote CoP as a pedagogical strategy for universities to implement in work-based learning modules. Rather it argues that the heuristic application of community of practice theorisation to support student reflections on work-based learning has the potential to deepen student learning so that it becomes transformatory (Ramsden, 2003). Neither does the paper attempt to engage in wider debates surrounding the assessment of reflective accounts of learning. Students may utilise the concepts within the CoP model for instrumental purposes within the employment market (Ball 2004). However, dominant discourses of employability might provide the backdrop for students to engage in deep reflections about their professional practice, and work-based learning might be seen in a new light by students if they see the potential benefits to their future career or professional identity (Ball, 2004). For students,

‘this perspective highlights the importance of finding the dynamic set of communities they should belong to – centrally and peripherally – and to fashion a meaningful trajectory through these communities over time’ (Wenger, 2000, p.243).

Thus, critical reflection on work-based experiences through the CoP lens might be an alternative mode of supporting students to engage in deeper, more profound, and more meaningful ways.

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