

Communities of Practice for International Students: the Role of Peer Assisted Study Sessions in Supporting Transition and Learning in Higher Education

ABSTRACT

There is growing interest in understanding how international students can best be enabled to adjust to, participate in and learn within Higher Education (HE). This paper examines findings from a recent study in the UK which explored the contribution the Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) scheme makes to this process.

An earlier study used in-depth interviews with international students to generate data; findings related to engagement with a learning community. This current study rescrutinised that data using Lave and Wenger's (1991) social-learning model, Communities of Practice (CoP), as a conceptual lens. Themes of community, practice and participation were used to explore and understand the role of PASS in supporting international students' transition and learning in HE.

Findings illuminated the role of PASS in providing international students with an intermediary CoP, providing support in their transition into the CoP on their course and university life. PASS facilitated their social integration with students of other nationalities, developing relationships with peers and PASS leaders, contributing to an increased sense of belonging to a community. Through the mutual engagement of attendees and leaders, students developed shared language, values and practices relating to their discipline and studying in UK HE. Established PASS leaders shared experiences of first year with 'newcomer' international students, supporting their transition into UK HE culture and enabling their legitimate peripheral participation to develop more fully. Participation in PASS fostered students' engagement with learning activities and independent study habits. Limitations to the study and suggestions for further research will also be discussed.

KEY WORDS: communities of practice; international students; peer assisted learning; learning communities; participation; adjustment; transition

INTRODUCTION

This article explores international students' participation in, and experience of, the Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) programme through the conceptual lens of Communities of Practice (CoP) model (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In particular, the role of PASS in enabling international students to join and belong to a CoP was explored in-depth, focusing particularly on how PASS supported international students' transition, participation and learning in Higher Education (HE). For the purpose of this study international students are defined as any student who has moved to a different country to study (Biggs, 2003). However, it is acknowledged that the term international student represents a diverse, heterogeneous student population.

In the context of the growing internationalisation of HE (DeVita and Case, 2003), there is a large body of research showing that international students can experience a variety of challenges in their transition into HE in the UK and abroad. These can include homesickness, culture shock, loneliness and difficulties learning in English as a Second Language (ESL) (Jones and Fleischer, 2012; Caruana and Spurling, 2007; Burns, 1991). These difficulties have been identified as barriers for international students' participation in HE learning activities (Krause, 2005), which exacerbate the process of transition and learning. This highlights the need for

increased support for international students in HE, particularly in their first year of study (Anderson et al, 2009; Krause, 2005; Forland, 2006).

Research evidences the cultivating of student learning communities as an effective approach for supporting students in their academic, social and emotional adjustment to studying in HE (Zhao and Kuh, 2004; Lenning and Ebbers, 1999). This in turn positively impacts students' engagement, retention and overall satisfaction with their student experience (Zhao and Kuh, 2004; Tinto et al, 1994). Learning communities have been described as comprising students who have regular contact with one another for the purpose of active, collaborative learning and social activities (Zhao and Kuh, 2004). These learning communities can typically be built around the curriculum, classroom, halls of residence or a particular need such as an interest or disability (Lenning and Ebbers, 1999). One mechanism that aims to foster a course-based learning community and is evidenced for supporting international students in their transition and adjustment into university is the PASS programme (Schmidt and Miller, 2009).

PASS aims to enhance the learning and student experience of undergraduates (Martin and Blanc, 1981; Wallace, 2003) and derives from the American Supplemental Instruction (SI) model (Martin and Blanc, 1981) driven by HE agendas for improving student retention, progression and achievement (Martin and Blanc, 1981; Blanc et al, 1983). Typically, PASS is led by second and third year student volunteers, who are trained and supervised by a member of staff to facilitate weekly, extra-curricular, small-group study sessions for first year students (Ody and Carey, 2009; Wallace, 1995). PASS leaders work in pairs to plan engaging sessions which address students' needs and foster collaborative learning through the use of interactive games, small group discussions and problem-solving scenarios. PASS leaders, who have previously experienced the first year of study, have a wealth of experience and knowledge to share about their course, study strategies, and broader experience of university life.

There is a large body of literature evidencing PASS as improving first year students' transition and adjustment to learning in HE; helping students to develop confidence, friendships, study skills and their understanding of course material, whilst providing a supportive environment to ask questions (Fostier and Carey, 2007; Coe et al, 1999; Arendale, 1994). Research suggests that PASS leaders also benefit highly from their involvement, developing confidence, personal and professional development and a host of transferable skills for employment (Donelan, 1999; Coe et al, 1999).

Drawing on CoP concept (Lave and Wenger, 1991), this research rescrutinises data generated from a previous research study that responded to the low participation of international students in a PASS scheme. The previous study used the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) as a theoretical framework for exploring the factors that influenced the participation of international students in PASS (Chilvers, 2013a). This current paper focuses on the overarching theme that emerged from that previous study – the role of PASS in facilitating international students in belonging to a CoP on their course (Chilvers, 2013a).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communities of Practice

The social learning concept Communities of Practice (CoP) (Lave and Wenger, 1991) describes a community of people, joined together by shared interests and a mutual participation in a particular practice. Newcomers to a CoP can learn a broad range of values, repertoires and practices from more established members of the community including:

Who is involved; what they do; what everyday life is like; how masters talk, walk, work, and generally conduct their lives; ... what other learners are doing; and what learners need to do to become full practitioners. (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.95)

Wenger (1998) argues that learning as social participation consists of four aspects which are “deeply interconnected and mutually defining” (p.5) including practice (learning by doing); meaning (learning as experience); community (learning as belonging) and identity (learning as becoming). For the purpose of addressing the research question, in-depth focus shall be restricted to themes of community, practice and participation. Whilst the meanings of each of these terms within CoP concept are complex, for the purpose of clarification these terms shall be defined. ‘Community’ refers to a special type of community whereby “practice is the source of coherence” (Wenger 1998, p72). ‘Practice’ is peoples’ mutual engagement in a joint enterprise consisting of shared repertoires (Wenger, 1998). Finally, ‘participation’ is defined as “a process of taking part and also... the relations with others that reflect this process.” (Wenger, 1998, p.53).

CoP originated from Lave and Wenger’s (1991) Situated Learning theory which posits that learning is a social process which occurs and is applied within a specific context and physical environment. Vygotsky’s (1978) Zone of Proximal Development also heavily informed CoP, highlighting the significant role of learning relationships within the context of practice for newcomers’ learning and belonging to the community. More knowledgeable existing members or experts of a community take on an apprenticeship-type relationship with newcomers or novices (Lave and Wenger, 1991). It is argued that receiving support from the ‘experts’ enables ‘newcomers’ to adapt to the culture and practice of the community, developing from legitimate peripheral participation (LPP), through to full participation (Wenger, 1998).

CoP concept has been used for exploring a number of dimensions of HE including adult education (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999); students’ transition into HE (Tobell and O’Donnell, 2005); adult students’ shifting identity formation throughout transitions in HE (O’Donnell and Tobell, 2007); and the student experience of SI from the perspective of SI leaders (Couchman, 2008). CoP concept can be useful for informing educational practitioners’ understanding of the student experience and the benefit of learning relationships between peers. This can inform the development of effective support mechanisms for supporting transition and learning, such as ensuring students have frequent opportunities to build relationships and engage in peer learning.

CoP are not cohesive homogenous units, but rather fluid and heterogeneous (Handley et al, 2006; Wenger, 1998), demonstrated in the context of this research. On arrival at university, there are a number of CoP that international students in this study could participate in including their PASS group (Couchman, 2008), their course (O’Donnell and Tobell, 2007), wider subject discipline (Parker, 2002), friendship groups with co-nationals (Montgomery and McDowell, 2009), and many others depending on their interests (Wenger, 1998) (see Figure 1). The practice in students’ PASS group is intrinsically linked to the practice of their course, discipline and student life more broadly.

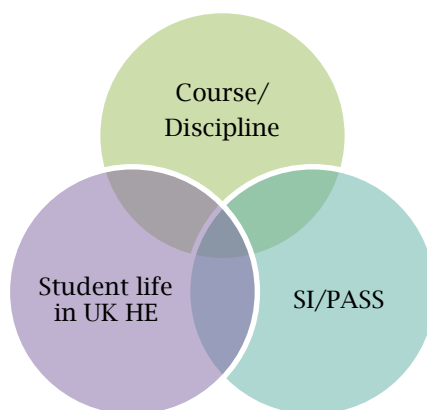


Figure 1. Multiple Intersecting CoP for International Students in this Research

Building on Couchman's (2008) findings, this research uses CoP concept as a lens for understanding the role of PASS in supporting international students in two ways: belonging to a CoP in PASS, whilst also adjusting to additional CoP on their course, discipline, and student life more broadly.

PASS as a Community of Practice

PASS offers students an opportunity to join and belong to a CoP, involving the mutual engagement of attendees and leaders, in developing a shared understanding and participation in discipline and learning-specific practices, and shared sense-making of their university experiences. PASS leaders play a vital role in facilitating sessions; their use of empathy, collaborative techniques and an inclusive approach have been argued as having a significant impact on developing this CoP (List and Miller, 2013; Couchman, 2008). Whilst PASS leaders are more experienced members of the university and degree course's CoP, it does not seem appropriate to refer to PASS leaders as being 'experts' of their discipline. However, they do have an expertise of being a student on their course, studying at a specific UK university at a certain time— an expertise that their lecturers do not have. Sharing these experiences provides newcomer-students with support in their LPP through to fuller participation in their course, discipline community, and university student experience (Couchman, 2008).

To date Lave and Wenger (1991) have mainly focused their application of CoP concept on professional practice and emphasise that the goal of participation in a CoP is not purely for the sake of learning, but also for participating in practice. In this research, students participate in PASS to develop their practice of studying in HE. PASS sessions encompass a breadth of practices ranging from collaborative and problem-based learning activities and reviewing course material; learning and practicing study techniques such as planning essays, referencing, or presentation skills; and the social and university-specific aspects of student life such as using the student-intranet and library or living in student accommodation (Couchman, 2008). This highlights the multiple intersecting CoP that exist within a PASS group including the disciplinary (and multidisciplinary if PASS runs on a core module shared by programmes), academic skills and student life specific to UK HE (see Figure 2.).

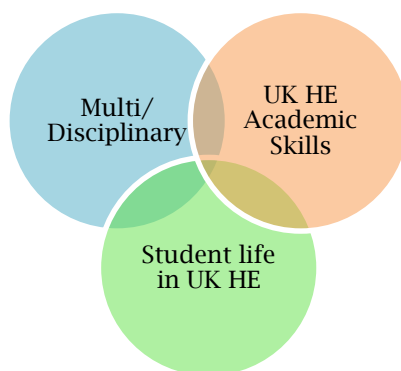


Figure 2. Multiple Intersecting CoP within PASS

Literature researching student transition into HE illuminates two reasons why PASS can be helpful in supporting all students in developing this breadth of new practices: 1) students have varying levels of skills, experience and preparedness from their educational backgrounds and therefore need support in developing these practices (Haggis, 2006), and 2) the transition into these HE practices can be challenging, particularly for international students (Sovic, 2008; Caruana and Spurling, 2007).

International Students and PASS

The transition into UK HE can be a challenging experience for some international students; on arrival they have to adjust to:

Multiple cultural frameworks: the host nation culture, the multicultural student cohort, the institutional culture of the university and the disciplinary culture. (Schmidt and Miller, 2009, p.13)

These cultural adjustments, can lead to some students experiencing 'learning shock' (Krause, 2005; Gu, 2005). Learning shock is experienced due to differences between students' home and host countries' educational approaches resulting in confusion and frustration at the different pedagogic methods (Gu, 2005). This can create a potential barrier for academic engagement and negatively impact on learning (Forland, 2006). International students have previously been potentially very successful members of a CoP in their previous educational institution, so whilst students of all nationalities have to make this transition and boundary crossing into new CoP in a UK HE institution (HEI) and course, there are more challenges for international students. This paper argues that PASS can provide focused support for international students in overcoming the barriers to making this transition.

Whilst there is much research into international students' learning (Caruana and Spurling, 2007; Burns, 1991) and transition experiences (Anderson et al, 2009; Sovic, 2008), there appears to be little literature covering international students' participation in PASS or CoP. Schmidt and Miller (2009) investigated the impact that PASS had on the transition experience of international Masters students from Asian and Hong Kong backgrounds studying at an Australian university. International students reported improved English language skills, developing friendships and receiving support in their adjustment into the Australian and university culture. Zaccagnini and Verenikina (2013) explored postgraduate international students' perceptions of PASS, finding positive experiences of all students surveyed. Students valued the importance of the learning environment in providing opportunities for interacting and asking questions in small groups with native students and their more experienced leaders. These studies suggest that schemes dedicated to supporting students' development in a learning community oriented context, such as PASS, can help integrate international students into the student learning community on their course. Other research investigated social learning taking place in friendship groups of international students, highlighting an additional CoP (Montgomery and McDowell, 2009). This research sought to contribute to this gap in literature by exploring international students' experiences of PASS as a CoP.

RESEARCH METHODS

Methodology

This research is informed by a previous study which was underpinned by a social constructivist paradigm (Guba and Lincoln, 1994) in which knowledge is co-constructed through interaction between the active researcher and participant, and the researcher's interpretations of these interactions (Creswell, 2009). In this study, the rescruiting of data was guided by an interpretivist epistemological stance, since I was exploring the subjective lived experiences of individual students and held an active role in shaping the data generation and analysis (Mason, 2002). The methodological approach for generating and analysing the data in the original research employed the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) constructs as a theoretical framework. This current study used themes from CoP concept as a framework for thematic analysis.

Interviews

In the original study conducted in 2013, a small-scale qualitative approach was taken using semi-structured 45-minute interviews, as opposed to a questionnaire or focus group, to facilitate in-depth exploration of

participants' individual perceptions and experiences (Ashley, 2012; Mason, 2002). A random sample of three interview participants' were sought from the second year international students on the relevant course, recruited by email and lecture announcements. The small sample did limit the study to only exploring the lived experiences of a small number of students and therefore the generalizability of this research (Cohen et al, 2000); however this was intentional as it allowed for the analysis to provide "thick rich descriptions to convey findings" (Creswell, 2009, p.191). Participants included 2 males and 1 female, who were originally from Portugal, Germany and China. All spoke English as their second language, and had spent time in the UK before studying at the host institution.

Analysis

For the first study, interview transcripts were analysed using the process of directed content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) using the TPB categories to code the transcripts which were recorded in a coding manual (Saldana, 2013). In this current study rescrutinising this data, the following research question was used to inform the analysis: Drawing from CoP concept, how do exploring themes of community, practice and participation enable a greater understanding of the role of PASS in supporting international students' transition and learning in HE? The transcripts were thematically analysed using CoP concept themes of community, practice and participation. Key quotes interpreted as representative of emerging findings were selected for discussion.

Ethics

In the original study ethical considerations were particularly important due to the implications of my dual role as an academic member of staff and an insider researcher at the host institution. It was considered that participants might have felt concerned about the potential disclosure of their responses to the PASS Supervisor, who was one of their course tutors and also my colleague. In accordance with BERA (2011) and the host institution's guidance (University of Brighton, 2011), the confidentiality and anonymity of student participants' identities and their responses was guaranteed as much as possible, although limitations to this were made clear. Acquiring participant consent was not deemed necessary for this current study due to the similar nature of enquiry.

Interviewing international students raised questions about cultural differences in communication and language barriers (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009; Holstein and Gubrium, 2003). Levels of directness in conversation, modes of questioning and eye contact can all vary between cultures (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003). In view of these potential cultural differences I tried to remain mindful throughout the interviews of potential issues. The layout of the furniture in the interview room intentionally avoided direct body language and eye contact which is viewed as being uncomfortable and disrespectful in some cultures (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003). Additionally at the start of the interviews, potential language barriers were addressed by inviting participants to draw a mind-map of their PASS experience in their first language, aiming to trigger their memories which they could refer to throughout the interview (Wheeldon and Faubert, 2009).

FINDINGS

Overall, findings suggest that PASS provides international students with an intermediary CoP; membership of which supports them in their transition and boundary crossing from their previous educational CoP into the CoP on both their course, and student life within the UK institution they are studying in. Additionally, PASS supports international students in their social integration into the course community, and their learning and development of the cultural and academic practices of their course, discipline and university life. Findings shall be explored further using the themes of community, practice and participation.

1) Community

Peer Relationships

PASS facilitates the mutual engagement of student attendees and leaders in a shared learning community in which peer relationships are fostered. In support of Wenger (1998) who argued that at the heart of a CoP can exist a “very tight node of interpersonal relationships” (p.76), participants described PASS facilitating opportunities to develop relationships with course peers:

We also meet other class mates, because we all new here so we didn't know each other very well so we started talking to each other. (P2)

The recent 'What Works Report' (Thomas, 2012), identified students developing stable, ongoing relationships on their course as a significant contributor to having a strong sense of belonging to a community, consequently having a positive impact on students' retention. One participant observed how the formalities of the classroom can be a barrier to students developing relationships, highlighting how PASS addresses the need for additional chances to socialise on their course:

Normally in lessons you wouldn't really talk to people that much because you're sitting there and the teacher doesn't really like you talking to your neighbours all the time. (P3)

A strong sense of belonging to a community is argued by Thomas (2012) to “be most effectively nurtured through [students' engagement in] main stream activities with an overt academic focus” (p.12). This accurately describes the role of PASS in providing students with an academically-focused community to belong to.

Learning from PASS Leaders

The relationships between attendees and leaders are pivotal to the PASS CoP (Zaccagnini and Verenikina, 2013; Couchman, 2008). Lave and Wenger (1991) describe how newcomers learn from experts who share their experiences and how they have overcome problems through story-telling (Lave and Wenger, 1991). PASS leaders are encouraged in training to share their experiences of their course and university life with PASS attendees, sharing the barriers to learning that they have overcome, strategies used to do so and to answer attendees' questions. Participants in this research valued their relationships with their leaders and the advice they gave, describing them as approachable and reassuring:

At the start it was just cool that second years would... I thought that if you go along you can ask about how it's like at the beginning because when you start you don't really know how uni is gonna be. (P3)

New students be scared facing new things and the course is harder, but the leaders would say 'it's alright'. (P2)

Transition into Community

Supporting research by Schmidt and Miller (2009), participants described how PASS leaders shared their experience and advice, supporting them in orientating themselves to life in the UK and the host institution:

I can say the PASS sessions is not only helpful for the academic stuff it's also about your life, how to live in [town] and study in the uni. For example where can you rent a property in the vicinity of [town] instead of student accommodation....also where can you shop. (P2)

When you start you don't really know how uni is gonna be so...you can ask them a bit and... get a bit of information about uni in general. (P3)

Social Integration

PASS also helps facilitate international students' social integration into a diverse student body (Zaccagnini and Verenikina, 2013; Schmidt and Miller, 2009). A common observation made by the participants was international students' tendency to befriend co-nationals and be less likely to socially integrate with students of other nationalities:

Usually international students they love to stick together and I think that's what I sort of realised last year that it's actually quite hard to get to know people or find new friends because Cyprus people would only stick together or Spanish people would only stick together. (P1)

Whilst co-nationals can provide comfort and a support network, not integrating with home students can prevent international students improving their English or making cultural adaptations (Maudeni, 2001). This can also have a negative impact on home students, reducing the diversity of their learning experiences (DeVita, 2002). Wenger (1998) identifies that CoP are diverse, consisting of people with different personalities, nationalities, beliefs and backgrounds, which brings richness. This reinforces the value of PASS facilitating international students' social integration, improving ESL, better preparing them to integrate with the CoP on their wider course and for future employment beyond university.

2) Practice

Shared Language

The development and practice of a shared language has been identified as a key aspect of CoP (Lave and Wenger, 1991), which for newcomers involves the process of "talking about and talking within practice" (p109). PASS provides a supportive environment for new students to learn and practice talking in a number of new languages including a learning language used at university regarding the practicing of UK HE academic skills, the subject-specific language and discourse, and specifically for international students, the added complexity of learning in ESL. PASS leaders model these languages and discourse, and are able to translate more complex disciplinary terminology and concepts using student-friendly language that staff might not be able to do, enabling a shared understanding with student attendees. This was referred to by P2 who compared the support received from both their PASS leaders and their Personal tutor, describing his preference for the common language he had with his peers:

When I studied the foundation it was just like personal tutor but it's not really helpful because your teacher has got this level and you this level and you be scared to talk to them, but if you talk to the same age then you have common language. (P2)

For some international students studying in ESL and speaking in ESL in front of peers can cause stress and anxiety (Kingston and Forland, 2004; Burns, 1991). PASS offers the opportunity for international students to practice and build confidence in speaking in ESL (Zaccagnini and Verenikina, 2013; Schmidt and Miller, 2009) as supported in this study:

Other international students- they're quite worried about actually talking English...and don't really know how to say stuff so rather don't say stuff and I think for themit's quite good if you have the chance to have conversations in a relaxed atmosphere. (P3)

However language barriers can still be a challenge for international students in PASS sessions, as P2 from China explains:

Some students have got accents I don't know and I don't quite understand when they're talking...they talk too quick and I don't know what they talk. I try to pick out main point and understand what they talk. (P2)

Shared Study Practice

PASS leaders plan engaging sessions that introduce students to the values and practices of their discipline; session activities can include sociable icebreakers, interactive games, small group discussions, group debates and problem-solving exercises. These enable students to develop a shared understanding and development of subject knowledge, academic skills and study techniques (Couchman, 2008). This was supported by participants in this study who described the value of revisiting course material and practicing and revising for exams in PASS:

To recap on what we've been doing for each module, sort of practising or having a go at it or if we had questions then ask. (P1)

Before the exams we were given practical help and we use to practice with previous exam questions...they did sort of meetings with all the groups and we had a go at previous exam questions and that was quite interesting I have to say. (P1)

Cultural Practice

Some international students might have to make cultural adjustments in order to adapt to potentially different pedagogic practices, cultural norms and expectations in UK HE (Gu, 2005). Lave and Wenger (1991) describe this process as "both absorbing and being absorbed in – the culture of practice" (p.95). The potential mismatch between a student's personal values and cultural background with their institution's, has been identified as a key factor that can influence a student's sense of belonging to the community (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and consequently, retention (Thomas, 2012). These adjustments can cause high levels of stress (Jones and Fleischer, 2012; Handley et al, 2006) and culture shock (Gu, 2005). This was echoed by participants in this study, one whom describes international students' sense of culture shock on arrival at university:

The PASS sessions always happen in first year as students come here and probably they didn't live here before so they feel strange, everything is strange here, everything is new. (P2)

This highlights the role of PASS in offering an intermediary CoP that supports international students' boundary crossing from their previous educational institution CoP into the new CoP on their course and student life in UK HE. Findings also suggest that PASS facilitates the transition experience from peripheral participation in university life, to fuller participation, as students develop confidence in these new practices.

3) Participation

Fostering Participation

CoP concept describes participation in a practice in which knowledge exists as an "epistemological principle of learning" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.98). Despite the importance of participation for learning, students' low participation in formalised curricular sessions such as lectures and seminars has been identified as a common problem across HE (Moore et al, 2008; Massingham and Herrington, 2006). In light of this, students' participation in weekly extra-curricular PASS sessions can be considered a valuable approach to fostering students' engagement with their course and effective independent study habits.

Motivation

Due to the voluntary nature of participation in PASS, students who do participate are speculated in literature as being more motivated in their studies generally (McGee, 2005). Both P1 and P2 who participated in all of the PASS sessions available to them both referred to perceiving themselves as motivated to learn. However CoP concept identifies motivation as a by-product of participation in a CoP (Lave and Wenger, 1991), which

suggests the potential benefit of PASS for motivating less enthused and engaged students. Whilst staff have been shown to employ a number of techniques to increasing attendance at PASS (Chilvers, 2013a; 2013b; White et al, 2008), this still raises questions about how to encourage the less motivated students to participate in PASS, particularly for international students who might be unfamiliar with the practice of peer learning or group work.

Barriers to Participation

Wenger et al (2002) identified that there can be a number of barriers to participating in CoP and that designing attractive, vibrant CoP is vital to keeping members participating. P3 who stopped participating in PASS after a couple of sessions, identified a number of factors influencing her decision to stop participating, including awkward social dynamics, her perception that the PASS leaders were not being helpful and that she was not gaining anything from the sessions. Her experiences highlight two dimensions that are important for maintaining students' participation: 1) leaders need to design sessions which are relevant to the students' needs, whilst remaining fun, engaging and beneficial for their learning; 2) the ongoing supervision that PASS leaders receive from staff is vital for their ongoing support and quality assurance of sessions. This highlights the interesting relationship between supervising staff and PASS CoP; whilst their lack of presence or participation in sessions is a distinctive dimension of PASS, it seems their supportive oversight is important, raising questions as to whether staff are on the periphery of PASS CoP or external to it?

DISCUSSION

The overarching findings and arising questions that have emerged from this research for each of the key themes of community, practice and participation shall be discussed.

Community

PASS provides international students with an intermediary CoP to belong to, supporting them in their transition from the CoP in their previous educational institution, to joining the CoP on their course, discipline and student life specific to their UK HEI. The intersecting nature of the multiple CoP that international students join on arrival at their institution (Figure 1.) raises questions about the differences between the CoP on a students' PASS group and course. The most distinguishing dimension between the two seems to be the lack of the lecturer or discipline expert in the PASS sessions, compared to course classes. The disadvantages of this are that PASS risks being unable to capture a full picture of the discipline, and the role of PASS leaders could be misunderstood to be inadequate, cost-free teaching. The advantages of the lack of a lecturer's presence and the leadership of students, is that PASS leaders can share their expertise and experience of student life and studying their particular degree at their institution. This includes their experiences of shifting identities, developing from simply studying their subject, e.g. Pharmacy, to becoming and embodying a new identity, for example, as a Pharmacist. However, with PASS being extra-curricular, does PASS exist to meet the deficiencies of the curriculum and course design? Should PASS be needed? This is a question that full exploration of is beyond the scope of this paper but it highlights the value of involving experienced students in providing new-student course inductions and reinforces the benefits of collaborative peer learning.

Practice

PASS supports international students in practicing a range of languages relating to studying and learning in UK HE including ESL, a shared language of learning in HE, the language of the discipline, and provides an open space for dialogue between peers to practice their discourse (Bohm, 1996). Other practices include the learning and application of UK HE academic skills, cultural norms and expectations, and the reviewing and understanding of course material. These cultural adjustments highlight the importance of educational practitioners, including PASS leaders, taking an inclusive approach in the classroom to ensure international

students fully understand the reasons for pedagogical practices used in UK HE and the expectations upon them (Couchman, 2008).

A significant feature of learning in UK HE is students' involvement in the generation of new knowledge, which is prompted through a research and enquiry-based curriculum (Healey, 2005; Brew, 2003). CoP concept focuses on how members acquire existing knowledge within a community, but doesn't address the question of how new knowledge is generated (Edwards, 2005). This highlights the constraints of PASS sessions which mainly involve revisiting existing knowledge, suggesting the importance of PASS including enquiry and research-based activities to facilitate students in co-constructing new knowledge in their PASS CoP. Although, it could also be argued that as an intermediary CoP, the focus of PASS is to provide a transitional support for new students' participation in their course CoP where opportunities for the generation of new knowledge are facilitated through the curriculum.

Participation

The variety of challenges that international students can experience when joining a UK HEI (Jones and Fleischer, 2012; Sovic, 2008; Burns, 1991), can cause difficulties for some in negotiating their place in the CoP on their course and discipline (Handley et al, 2006). Lave and Wenger (1991) claim that "an extended period of legitimate peripherality provides learners with opportunities to make the culture of practice theirs" (p.95). However, similar to O'Donnell and Tobbell's (2007) observations about the challenges for mature students' transition into HE, for some international students, their experience of legitimate peripheral participation is not necessarily a positive construction, but one of confinement, stress and isolation. This reinforces the benefit of PASS providing an intermediary CoP for international students to discuss these difficulties with other students in an inclusive and supportive environment. It also highlights the importance for PASS leader training to equip all PASS leaders with an understanding of the challenges experienced by international students, cultural awareness and facilitation techniques to address language barriers in sessions (Chilvers, 2013b).

Edwards (2005) argues that defining 'participation' is a weakness of CoP concept as it only focuses on the behavioural, social and collective dimensions of learning by participation, and disregards the cognitive and individual dimensions. This implies limitations to the use of the CoP concept in this research, suggesting other theoretical frameworks and perspectives could illuminate other dimensions to the learning and transition experiences of international students in PASS. Additionally, whilst Wenger (1998) identifies a number of different learning trajectories that a person can take in their participatory learning, CoP concept neglects to define the notion of 'full participation'. This research demonstrates the difficulty of defining 'full participation' in the context of both studying in HE, in which participation might look differently for individual students depending on their circumstances or aspirations (Handley et al, 2006), and particularly for international students due to the challenges they experience that often confine their participation to the periphery of CoP. Despite these limitations to CoP concept, its explanatory power for understanding interrelationships for learning, and the interconnected, multidimensional aspects of learning has been very useful for this research.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, using CoP concept has been useful for illuminating the role of PASS in providing international students with an intermediary CoP to provide support in the boundary crossing and transition experiences of joining a UK HEI. PASS facilitates international students in adjusting to cultural norms and expectations, and learning knowledge, practices and skills for participating more fully in the CoP on their course, discipline and student life at their UK HEI. International students benefit from a supportive environment facilitated by experienced students to receive a student-specialised induction to their course, student life, institution and

UK HE academic skills. This support stretches beyond induction week, typically throughout the potentially vulnerable first semester of their first academic year.

Limitations to the CoP concept have prompted questions about international students' experiences on the periphery of university learning communities, highlighting the importance of inclusive practice and support for international students. The existence of PASS raises interesting questions about potential gaps in course and curriculum design, and questions also remain concerning the investigation of international students' cognitive and individual participation for learning in UK HE.

These questions could be addressed in further research; additionally, further use of CoP concept could focus in-depth on different themes such as meaning (learning by experience) and identity (learning as becoming). For example, what impact does engaging in PASS as a CoP have on students', and specifically international students', constructions of their discipline identity? Furthermore, international students' experiences and perceptions of their transition experiences from previous educational CoP, to joining new CoP in UK HE, could be investigated. This could be helpful for informing the ongoing internationalisation of course curricula and the further development of learning support for international students.

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