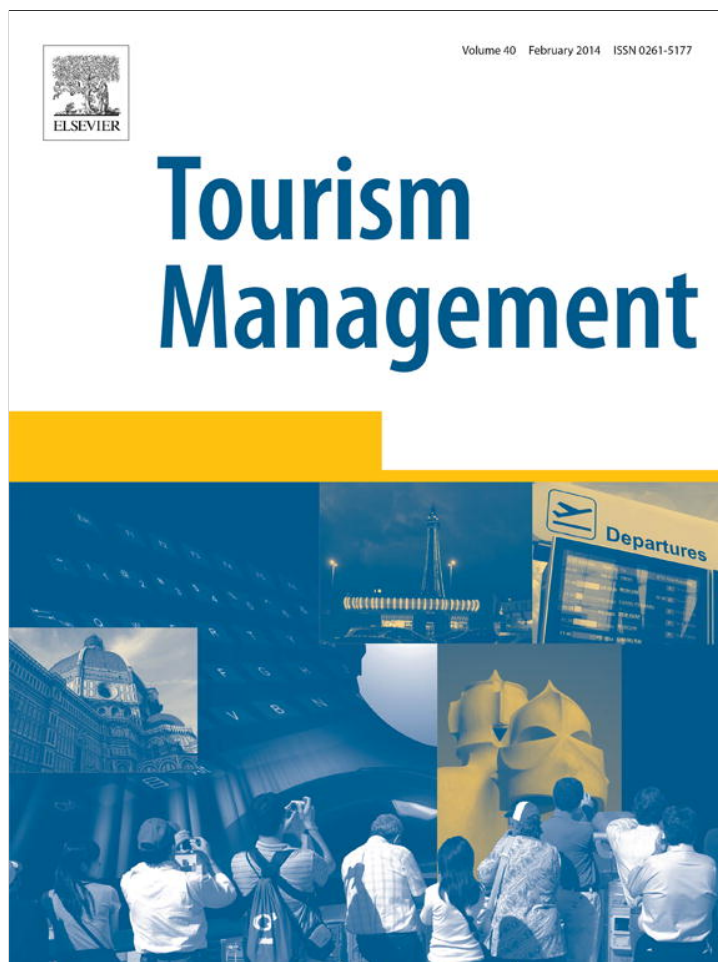


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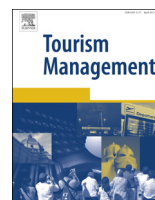
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## The social dynamics of micro-firm learning in an evolving learning community

Leana Reinl\*, Felicity Kelliher<sup>1</sup>

School of Business, Waterford Institute of Technology, Cork Road, Waterford, Ireland

### H I G H L I G H T S

- Reciprocated engagement nurture seeding structures that facilitate shared practice.
- Non-legitimised participation damages learning relationships as time passes.
- Learner competence increases via seeding structures as relationships mature.
- A diminishing broker role leads to increased levels of learner autonomy.
- Over time membership becomes community motivated and resource value is optimised.

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### A B S T R A C T

Micro-firms dominate the tourism sector internationally, yet there is a notable absence of studies specifically relating to their learning interactions with other tourism firms. Even when studied, a social learning lens is rarely applied in either micro-firm or tourism learning network research despite its relevance in this domain. In seeking to understand and map the social dynamics of micro-firm learning and participation in an independent learning network, the authors studied an evolving learning community (ELC) situated in Ireland's south west region over a four-year period. The findings demonstrate the complexity associated with creating and sustaining a social learning infrastructure in this context. An ELC model is proffered to provide insight into inter and intra social dynamics that influence learning development in the micro-firm setting. The proposed future research includes the study of additional ELCs, in Ireland and other countries, for the purposes of cross case/cross country comparison, and in pursuit of greater insight into the social dynamics of these communities.

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### 1. Introduction

While organisations can be categorised using a myriad of criteria, the use of employee numbers as a delineator between company categories has become the standard in micro-firm management literature (Liberman-Yaconi, Hooper & Hutchings, 2010), and one which has been adopted at European level. Therefore, a micro-firm is defined as one that employs no more than ten full-time employees and possesses a turnover of less than two hundred and fifty thousand euro (European Commission, 2010). These firms account for 92.1% of all firms in the European economy (European Commission, 2011) and represent the vast majority of

tourism providers in Ireland (Fáilte Ireland, 2010)<sup>2</sup>. There is increasing recognition that lone tourism operators will not achieve strategic intent in isolation (Tinsley & Lynch, 2007; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003) with some recommending a departure from the notion of these firms as autonomous economic entities (von Friedrichs Grängsjö & Gummesson, 2006). In reality, micro-tourism owners have long since worked together to maintain and grow their business relationships with suppliers and markets, in an attempt to overcome resource constraints (Morrison & Teixeira, 2004) and seasonal demand distortions for the tourism product (Irvine & Anderson, 2004), minimise the impact of peripheral locations (Baum & Hagen, 1999; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003) and

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +353 51 834107.

E-mail addresses: [ireinl@wit.ie](mailto:ireinl@wit.ie), [reinlleana@gmail.com](mailto:reinlleana@gmail.com) (L. Reinl), [fkelliher@wit.ie](mailto:fkelliher@wit.ie) (F. Kelliher).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +353 51 845602.

<sup>2</sup> Fáilte Ireland is the National Tourism Development Authority of Ireland, whose role is to support the tourism industry and work to sustain Ireland as a high-quality and competitive tourism destination.

ultimately to offer a tourism destination 'package' (von Friedrichs Grängsjö & Gummesson, 2006) in their location.

A growing body of micro-firm tourism research acknowledges the value of collaborative learning networks (Halme, 2001; Morrison, Lynch & Johns, 2004; Pavlovich, 2003; Reinl & Kelliher, 2010; Pavlovich), and the learning relationships within (Gibson & Lynch, 2007; Kelliher, Foley & Frampton, 2009; Morrison et al., 2004). Tourism research also demonstrates the learning benefits that accrue from tourism network participation (Denicolai, Cioccarelli & Zucchella, 2010; Pavlovich, 2003). As these firms learn in unique ways both individually and collectively, it is worth considering a definition specifically constructed for the micro-firm learning network environment (Reinl & Kelliher, 2010, pp. 142–3):

“a socially constructed and socially supported learning environment that enables the development of network relationships, wherein individual learning is enhanced through cooperative learning strategies disseminated through the structures, support and ethos of the network, thereby combining resources and enhancing learning competence and business development.”

Such networks exist for a variety of reasons including marketing, innovation and tourism destination development (Dewhurst, Dewhurst & Livesey, 2007; Palmer, 1998; von Friedrichs Grängsjö & Gummesson, 2006), and while network purpose will vary from one network to the next, learning remains social in nature within these communities (Wenger, 1998). The creation of individual and collective micro-firm learning competencies is built on social exchanges and the telling of “‘stories’ of successful implementation and integration of learning in the workplace” (Reinl & Kelliher, 2010, pp. 146–7) that “help foster an environment in which knowledge can be created and shared and, most importantly, used to improve effectiveness, efficiency, and innovation” (Lesser & Everest, 2001, p. 46) in and across member firms. Over time, sustained communal learning activity offers individual members strategic benefits (Denicolai et al., 2010; Man, 2007), while resultant business activity promotes the building of social capital (von Friedrichs Grängsjö & Gummesson, 2006) to the ultimate benefit of tourism development (Kelliher et al., 2009; Morrison, Lynch & Johns, 2004).

While early success is evident, the sustainability and effectiveness of these learning communities is somewhat left to chance. Specifically, tourism learning network studies predominantly focus on facilitated network environments, which are “formally set up for the primary purpose of increasing knowledge” (Bessant & Tsekouras, 2001, p. 88) and are frequently supported by national and international tourism policy initiatives. From a social learning vantage point, the learning dynamics made visible in this literature are naturally distorted by the respective theoretical lenses underpinning the research. In addition, being isolated outside of a social learning framework, they fail to reveal the dynamics that influence this learning process in a comprehensive manner (Tinsley & Lynch, 2007). Considering the inherently social nature of such learning (particularly after facilitated network engagement ends), the deeply networked and socially supported nature of the tourism industry (Kokkranikal & Morrison, 2011), and the value of a social learning perspective in this domain (Kelliher & Reinl, 2011; Shaw & Williams, 2009), the paucity of research focusing on the social dynamics that influence learning within a micro-firm tourism learning community is surprising. This is the key contribution of this paper.

The paper is structured as follows. In the forthcoming review of literature, the social dynamics of learning are discussed and tourism learning network nuances are outlined. Micro-firm learning and participation in an independent learning community

setting is then contemplated, through the application of the community of practice philosophy (Wenger, 1998). A longitudinal case method is applied to permit the study of an evolving learning community (ELC) over a four-year period. Key findings and research outcomes are highlighted, while recommendations for sustaining ELCs are offered. These recommendations are aimed at tourism policy makers and architects of micro-firm learning network structures, as well as tourism practitioners seeking to maximise the effectiveness of their professional learning communities. An ELC model is proffered to provide an insight into inter and intra social dynamics that influence learning development in the micro-firm setting. The proposed future research includes the study of additional ELCs, in Ireland and other countries, for the purposes of cross case/cross country comparison, and in pursuit of greater insight into the social dynamics of these communities.

## 2. Micro-firm learning and participation in an evolving learning community

Tourism learning community participation consists of voluntary engagement among micro-firms for the purpose of learning (Fuller-Love & Thomas, 2004; Gibson & Lynch, 2007). Of note is that even when voluntary, the lifestyle-orientation of many tourism entrepreneurs frequently results in a pre-disposition to emphasise social and personal goals over community learning development goals (Dewhurst et al., 2007). As such, individual motivation to participate in a learning community and resultant learning outcomes will inevitably vary from one individual to the next, an issue previously identified as problematic in the micro-firm learning context (Noel & Latham, 2006). Notwithstanding this variation and the incumbent challenges therein, social learning occurs through the shared pursuit of an activity that encompasses an ‘evolving and continuously renewed set of relations’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 50) which are incumbent in the learning process.

In an ELC, this learning process is not formal in nature; nevertheless it is sophisticated (Kelliher & Reinl, 2011). Participation is framed by ‘seeding structures’<sup>3</sup> and a range of social learning strategies emerge as members interact in pursuit of practice (Denicolai et al., 2010; Kelliher & Reinl, 2011; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Where effective, these strategies can result in learning development, detectable through skills, attributes and behaviours which demonstrate competence in the learning role (Man, 2007). ELCs are frequently managed and coordinated by a core group or hub comprising key individuals (often referred to as champions in the network literature) that orchestrate community practice (Haugen Gausdal, 2008; Kelliher et al., 2009; Morrison et al., 2004). Despite the different label, these individuals undertake a range of ‘learning broker’ activities that stimulate higher level learning behaviours (Johannisson, 2000; Man, 2007) such as guiding proactive learning behaviours and assisting others to identify and leverage learning opportunities. Brokers also have a role in maintaining an action/reflection balance (Halme, 2001; Man, 2007) within the tourism learning community, and in enabling reflexive capability development without a devaluation of autonomy (Kelliher & Reinl, 2011). However, learner qualities such as the ability to be reflexive as ‘a means of intelligent participation’ (Jørgensen & Keller, 2008, p. 535) may be undervalued in a micro-firm learning community where resource constraints can influence

<sup>3</sup> This concept features in Thompson's (2005) work on communities of practice (CoPs) within larger organisations and refers to structural interventions applied in pursuit of CoP development and subsequent management. In the context of this research the term equates to facilitated learning network structures that seek to promote long term learning relationships among network members.

**Table 1**  
Social dynamics of learning and participation in tourism ELCs.

| Core theme                      | Description  | Key authors  |
|---------------------------------|--|--|
| Initiation & evolution          | Community of practice philosophy; shared pursuit of ELC initiated by seeding structures and evolves with emergent social learning strategies   | Wenger, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Kelliher & Reinl, 2011                                  |
| Participation                   | Voluntary engagement framed by interdependence and autonomy; mixed inside/outside forms of participation are effective in maintaining a learning emphasis and an action/reflection balance | Fuller-Love & Thomas, 2004; Gibson & Lynch, 2007; Reinl & Kelliher, 2010                   |
| Learning competency development | Pursuit of effective practice and underlying pursuit of learning skill, attribute & behaviour development, often coordinated by champion/broker in the early stages of the ELC             | Man, 2007; Morrison et al., 2004; Haugen Gausdal, 2008                                     |
| Broker role                     | Stimulate learning and ELC buy-in; role activities should underpin long-term ELC practice, although 'broker' emphasis should diminish over time to ensure learner autonomy                 | Johannisson, 2000; Halme, 2001; Man, 2007; Murillo, 2011; Novelli et al., 2006             |
| ELC value                       | Resource constraints may have a negative impact on perceived long-term ELC value resulting in a need to legitimise learning strategies   | Jørgensen & Keller, 2008; Handley et al., 2006; Morrison & Teixeira, 2004                  |
| Learning strategies             | Social learning sets, peer reflection techniques, informal encounters, expert/external intervention  | Lynch & Morrison, 2007; Morrison & Teixeira, 2004; Kelliher et al., 2009                   |
| ELC structure                   | Sub-group emphasis influenced by resource criteria; avoid practice & learning residing at this level to ensure democratic structure & shared meaning                                       | Lave & Wenger, 1991; Morrison et al., 2004; Handley et al., 2006; Roberts, 2006            |
| Shared meaning                  | Can take time to build collaborative learning relationships; enhanced by active & inclusive engagement & community level learning strategies   | Handley et al., 2006; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Gibson & Lynch, 2007; Halme, 2001; Palmer, 1998 |
| ELC boundary fluidity           | Assumes social learning is fluid; process of internal & external ELC manoeuvring shaped between learning communities permitting access to expertise/insights                               | Wenger, 1998, 2000; Halme, 2001; Tinsley & Lynch, 2007                                     |

learning and participation (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham & Clark, 2006; Roberts, 2006) by emphasising the value of 'quick wins' (Devins, Gold, Johnson & Holden, 2005; Sullivan, 2000) above long term learning gains.

An open learning community philosophy assumes that social learning is fluid within and outside the ELC, therefore, learning broker activities should include moving knowledge in and out of the community, creating connections and bringing back information and ideas to the wider group (Wenger, 2000), while protective modifications such as membership criteria should be avoided as they can constrain the ELC's knowledge flow (Ahlström-Söderling, 2003), thereby negating the potential for boundary navigation. Ideally, as the ELC matures, objects of learning<sup>4</sup> should materialise and traverse the boundaries between communities (Halme, 2001; Kelliher & Reinl, 2011; Wenger, 1998), enabling the evolution of learning in context. For example, newcomers and external experts provide an important outside-in perspective (Denicolai et al., 2010; Tinsley & Lynch, 2007). By questioning the value of ELC activities; these participants re-negotiate practice on their own terms, instigate reflection among longer-term members (Kelliher & Reinl, 2011; Wenger, 1998) and counteract the potential of the ELC becoming insular as time passes (Wenger, 1998).

A variety of lifestyle motivations influence forms of participation (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000; Dewhurst et al., 2007; Getz & Carlsen, 2005; Morrison & Teixeira, 2004) and learning evolution to varying degrees (Noel & Latham, 2006; Wenger, 1998). While diverse forms of ELC participation may be beneficial from a learning perspective (Gibson & Lynch, 2007; Halme, 2001; Kelliher & Reinl, 2011); diversity alone does not guarantee success. Micro-firm owner/managers have a tendency to assume a short term action emphasis to the detriment of learning (Devins et al., 2005; Sullivan, 2000) and a number of social learning strategies have proven to be

effective in terms of achieving deeper levels of learner development and participation in tourism learning networks (Morrison & Teixeira, 2004; Reinl & Kelliher, 2010). These strategies include the establishment of social learning sets<sup>5</sup> (Devins et al., 2005; Kelliher et al., 2009; Lynch & Morrison, 2007) which incorporate peer reflection techniques (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Morrison & Teixeira, 2004). In an ELC, informal encounters between members provide natural opportunities for reflection and the analysis of learning needs (Wenger, 1998). It is likely that learning brokers will orchestrate many of these activities; however, their contributions may be of diminished value in the longer term as inevitably ELC members decide what forms of participation are legitimised within the community (Handley et al., 2006; Murillo, 2011). Previous research also demonstrates a requirement to balance broker reliance with autonomous learning to counteract learned helplessness (Reinl & Kelliher, 2010).

There is a view that smaller firms lack the resources to fully exploit the learning benefits of community participation (Handley et al., 2006; Roberts, 2006), and the sub-group structure frequently found in ELCs is likely to be a response to these constraints (Halme, 2001; Kelliher & Reinl, 2011). However, in the absence of shared meaning (Palmer, 1998) and an underpinning learning architecture at community level, there is a danger that learning may begin to reside in these sub-groups, to the detriment of learning in the wider community. Ideally, ELC practice should incorporate and reflect the collective viewpoints of its members (Gibson & Lynch, 2007) and offer physical or electronic means of community engagement (Novelli, Schmitz & Spencer, 2006), as the long-term success of both learning and participation is dependent upon a democratic structure that permits engagement and facilitates the establishment of shared meaning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Morrison et al., 2004; Palmer, 1998). This is not to suggest that a harmoniously held set of beliefs is the ideal from a learning

<sup>4</sup> In an ELC, learning objects encompass and give form to the experience and understanding of ELC members. Refined within a democratic negotiation domain, these objects permit the learning community to continuously produce new meaning and knowledge (Handley et al., 2006; Wenger, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Social learning sets comprise micro-firm owner/managers, external experts and experienced facilitators that encourage active participation and experience sharing.

perspective. To the contrary, differences in interpretation are opportunities for negotiation that permit the community to continuously produce new meanings (Halme, 2001; Morrison et al., 2004); therefore they are essential to learning (Wenger, 1998). Finally, some suggest that learning communities will eventually fade in the absence of an external impulse to remain engaged in the learning cycle (Halme, 2001; Morrison et al., 2004). As previously highlighted, the tourism literature acknowledges the value of a core group of network champions in sustaining practice (Gibson & Lynch, 2007; Kelliher & Reinl, 2011; Novelli et al., 2006). This need suggests that succession planning is required to ensure that broker activities underpin ELC practice in the longer term (Gibson & Lynch, 2007). The key themes identified in the literary review are catalogued in Table 1:

Table 1 outlines the evolutionary nature of learning community participation as identified in the literary-informed themes, moving from initiation and the promotion of participation in the initial stages of community construction into the development of learning competencies at individual and collective levels supported by the broker role. Subsequently, the learning community (LC) should ideally pursue a flexible structure with greater learner autonomy and de-emphasised broker activity to facilitate both internal shared meaning and boundary fluidity in pursuit of evolutionary learning strategies and sustainable community benefit.

### 3. Method

The literary themes (Table 1) were explored in a longitudinal interpretive case study conducted over a four-year period, wherein the authors observed an ELC, established in 2007 by five core members, and comprising 55 micro-firm tourism owner/managers. Numerous writers endorse the application of this method when studying collective learning in smaller firms (for example; Gibb, 1997; Kelliher et al., 2009; Romano, 1989; Thompson, 2005), and in this case, the length and depth of the study allowed the authors to observe the dynamic process that influences learning and participation (Florén, 2003; Florén & Tell, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Palmer, 1998) and to track the evolution of shared practice (Ahlström-Söderling, 2003). The research design incorporated a range of ELC learners in different settings in an attempt to understand individual social learning dynamics and to appreciate learning nuances at individual, sub-group and community level in order to facilitate the balancing act between the collective and the individual building of social capital (von Friedrichs Grängsjö & Gummesson, 2006). Applied data collection techniques adopted a crystallised approach utilising longitudinal observation, in-depth interviews, internal documentary review, field notes and reflective diaries; while a comprehensive research framework was put in place to manage the volume and variety of data associated with a study of this nature. These management and analysis plans, enabled in part through the use of the NVivo software package, facilitated the development of iterative case analyses that enlightened the observed learning process (Toiviainen, 2007). Resultant perspectives and insights permitted the identification of important patterns and themes (Eisenhardt, 1989) which facilitated the holistic analysis required to understand the structures and relationships of a learning community (Benzie, Mayers, Somekh & Cisneros-Coherour, 1994).

#### 3.1. ELC background

Most of the observed ELC members are micro-firms, have been in business for five years or more, fit the age profile of 40–60+ years old and operate within a 1 km radius of one another. The ELC location, on the south west coast of Ireland, has a population of

approximately 400 permanent residents and is situated between two busy tourism destinations, Cork and Kerry. This rural community relies heavily on tourism, as does the rest of the region, and a regional airport and Welsh ferry service are located nearby. Spectacular scenery and a wide variety of water-based activities draw many domestic and foreign visitors to the ELC location and its' surrounding Isles, which are serviced by local ferries. There are a number of restaurants and bars located in the area. There is also a range of accommodation providers that are pre-dominantly owner-managed guesthouse and bed and breakfast businesses. Furthermore, there are many holiday homes built during the economic boom (2001–6) as a result of Irish government tax incentives at the time, resulting in an over capacity of such accommodation in the area. The ELC was initially chaired by A<sup>6</sup> (2007–2010), who adopted a broker role (Halme, 2001; Johannisson, 2000; Man, 2007). Other ELC members participate in a variety of 'live' projects that facilitate active learning, much like the approach advocated by von Friedrichs Grängsjö and Gummesson (2006); some activities are enabled by national/regional development funding and are supplemented by annual ELC membership fees. Similar to other observed learning communities (Novelli et al., 2006), regular emails, including detailed meeting minutes, are the primary means of community level communication. The vast majority of ELC meetings occur at one of the founding member's hotel, situated in the heart of the village. General meetings are held twice yearly to facilitate ELC member engagement in preliminary planning for the forthcoming tourist season. Several sub-committees have responsibility for festival planning and organisation, website development and maintenance, marketing and general tourism activities and sub-group meetings occur more frequently. Members report back to the wider group at the general meetings on their interim activities, mirroring Wenger's (1998) community of practice criteria.

#### 3.2. Research process

Initially, the authors observed the establishment of the ELC, and shadowed core members in action. Relevant research criteria were identified in this phase of the study in interaction with the literary themes (Table 1). As the ELC became embedded in the local tourism community, naturally evolved sub-committees served as distinct units of observation. Two sub-group studies, conducted simultaneously and taking eight months to complete, permitted the refinement of the research design and of the emergent findings. As themes emerged, a more structured approach to data collection was adopted (as described in: Adler & Adler, 1994; Jones & Somekh, 2005) and pre-defined themes (Table 1) served as a guide to capture occurrences of interest. The NVivo software proved valuable in terms of sorting, reducing and managing the data while preserving its contextual richness in a form that could be re-visited as required (Sarantakos, 2005).

Observation at eight ELC meetings, held monthly, focused on the nine key members (A-I) and their interactions with the ELC. This permitted the researchers to "move beyond the selective perceptions of others" (Patton, 1990, p. 204) by being in situ as learning emerged. Where appropriate, the authors departed from the research guide (Eisenhardt, 1989) allowing numerous informal interactions and conversations to reveal rich insights into the social dynamics of learning and participation (Pavlovich, 2003). The researchers' negotiated full access to the ELC's group email communications from 2007 to 2011, these included detailed meeting

<sup>6</sup> Core observed ELC members are identified using an alphabetical coding system (A–Z) to protect anonymity.

minutes which provided summaries of ELC meeting interactions, agenda items, outcomes and responsibilities. As email communications occurred in 'real-time', they were closer to speech, and facilitated the observation of important learner interactions and developments (Hodder, 1994). Finally, historical records of ELC activity dating back to 2007 offered valuable additional insights into practice and learning in the early stages of the ELC's development, while the researchers' diaries provided for 'active reflexivity' (Symon, 1998) in recognition of their role as part of the social events observed and narrated.

#### 4. Empirical findings

The research findings are presented in a phased manner; emulating the observed progression from community construction (phase one) in years one and two through to specific learning activities (phase two) and into community learning evolution (phase three) in the latter stages of this four-year longitudinal study. These were not formal steps where one phase ended before another began; rather they represent observed shifts in communal learning activity (Denicolai et al., 2010), where LC members' perspectives and insights enlightened the evolving learning process (Toiviainen, 2007) and permitted the identification of new and refined patterns and themes over time (Eisenhardt, 1989), ultimately facilitating the holistic analysis required to understand the structures and relationships within the observed ELC.

##### 4.1. Phase one – learning community infrastructure under construction

While the initial objective of the ELC was "to increase the tourist season" through a "focus on marketing" a catalyst consistent with the findings of Dewhurst et al. (2007), LC participation was framed by an intentional learning agenda, where the ELC was seen as "a cooperative" and "a good community project" by core LC members. Active members acknowledged that by "learning from one another" they gained "better knowledge of local tourism products or businesses", reinforcing the ethos that 'individual learning is enhanced through cooperative learning strategies' (Reinl & Kelliher, 2010) in a network environment. This activity resulted in the development, improvement and promotion of the tourism destination offering in year two. Thus, individual learning about "marketing" in the early stages of LC activity resulted in wider learning about 'destination planning' that was then used to improve individual micro-businesses through increased tourism activity in the ELC location, suggesting that LC members' perspectives and insights enlightened the evolving learning process (Toiviainen, 2007). Activities that did not embrace this ethos were "... not what we're about" and were considered peripheral in context. Core members were unified in pursuit of the ideology that "the rising tide lifts all boats", however, establishing shared meaning among the wider community was more difficult to achieve, reinforcing the findings of Dewhurst et al. (2007) and Palmer (1998) in regards to lifestyle entrepreneurs: "Initially [we] said 'why don't we involve the whole village?' ... but it's quite hard to keep some people on board". Thus, some members promoted the ELC value: "The way in which we all interact and actively work together to generate business ... In my opinion that is the success of [ELC location] over many other tourist destinations in [region]", while others were reticent of the fact that "you can only take it so many steps at a time", thereby acknowledging the nature of evolution within such communities.

##### 4.2. Phase two – learning activity focus

In the initial stages of the learning community's evolution, the core team conceded that "we just threw ourselves in to it head first"

and a short term action-emphasis typified early ELC practice, where specific tasks where the primary focus, mirroring Sullivan's (2000) findings. This early engagement offered insight into: "the way we get things done here" creating a sense of community, and evidence of initial success followed. For example in its first year of operation, the ELC established and organised two annual festivals in the shoulder tourist seasons (September–October and March–April) which helped to increase both tourism activity and the length of the tourist season in the area. Higher level learning activities, an important factor in the sustainability of ELCs (Bessant & Tsekouras, 2001), were less prevalent during this time with the exception of 'A' and a few core members who encouraged reflective activity: "On the agenda- Heritage Festival (post-op comments and suggestions)" (ELC email). Despite these efforts, the broker role was not legitimised initially and those who displayed broker intent were tentative: "when it's a company [active involvement] is a straightforward process, but when people work collectively in a voluntary capacity it's difficult, you can't force people", thereby acknowledging the boundaries of voluntary participation previously identified by Fuller-Love and Thomas (2004) and Gibson and Lynch (2007), among others. 'A' demonstrated numerous traits associated with the broker role; coordinating people and tasks; informing members of regulatory and "health and safety requirements", communicating within and outside the group; liaising with external stakeholders: "revenue raised from the festival will go to a charity organisation" and keeping the wider group informed of relevant developments and opportunities for learning and for future ELC activity. Considering the 'socially constructed' nature of this learning environment, this pivot role allowed a funnel through which ELC members could 'enhance learning competence and business development' both as individual business owners and as community members (Tinsley & Lynch, 2007; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003). Many additional activities were part of A's coordinating function as chairperson and had little learning emphasis; this may have been a reflection of the significant workload and complex nature of A's role, although it may also reflect the 'construction' aspect of the LC in context (Table 1).

Observations throughout the case confirmed that there were varying levels of ELC participation (as anticipated by Noel & Latham, 2006), although it should be noted that diverse forms of participation are effective from a learning perspective (Halme, 2001; Kelliher & Reinl, 2011; Man, 2007). For example, semi-active members attended meetings, manned festival stalls, signed up and paid their fee to be included in the group's website and brochure and attended important meetings like the six-monthly general meetings. These members brought ELC initiatives to life, as evidenced in the following email extract relating to an off-season sailing event: "[A] agrees to check with [U] for availability of the Sailing Club for the weekend. [O] will check whether [U] will provide sailing tours. Subject to weather [W] will provide Sea Safari rides. [A] to check with [L] and [J] for their kayaking and whale-watch tours availability. [X] is happy to open up the castle for both Sat/Sun provided we have guest speakers to give it a purpose/theme", (ELC email). Observational data suggests that this engagement was partly as a result of community peer pressure, while the availability of time also influenced the level and type of participation: "I had the time, and tourism is at such low ebb ... there were one or two people who didn't have enough time to do it [work on developing the website]", reinforcing the findings of Morrison and Teixeira (2004), Handley et al. (2006) and Roberts (2006), while also emphasising the value of boundary fluidity in context (Table 1).

Despite the voluntary nature of ELC participation, the relationships within entail expectations: "it was about everyone getting involved and sharing the workload ... not people joining up and taking a back seat". Several comments from active members demonstrated

that less-active participation damaged ELC relationships over time: “It’s [the task of getting members to send information for the website] like it’s a chore ... it’s not a priority, which makes the whole thing like pushing glue up a hill”; “I had the whole thing done you know [referring to the website], all they had to do was tweak it.” These findings echo challenges highlighted in Fuller-Love and Thomas (2004), Gibson and Lynch (2007) and Kelliher and Reindl (2011)’s research. This attitude may be pre-emptive considering the contribution of some members, who, although “not really involved in [the ELC] at all”, attended an Adventure Travel World Summit, networked with 500 people from 50 countries, handed out [ELC] brochures and subsequently summarised and communicated key points that emerged from the summit to the wider ELC. This, and other examples suggest that members did not fully appreciate the learning value of different forms of participation, leading to perceived inequities in effort (Handley et al., 2006), and ultimately, disgruntlement and disengagement on the part of active members: “I feel that I have done my share”; “It’s time for me to focus on my own business now”. This is despite the value of such ‘intermittent’ members in counteracting the potential of the ELC becoming insular as time passes (Wenger, 1998).

Most ELC activity occurred at sub-group level where tasks were allocated to get “the ball rolling”. Some sub-committee developments were reported back to the chairperson (A), who in turn communicated them to the wider community via email thereby facilitating the link between the ELC layers (Novelli et al., 2006), although this communication vein was not engaged with by all members. This was unfortunate as there were many instances where email correspondence added value to emergent ideas and activities thereby producing new meaning (Halme, 2001; Morrison et al., 2004). Other less frequent users added to discussions that they had read previously via email while at face-to-face meetings. Frequently, informal encounters at bridge [cards] or over a drink in the local bar provided the context for further planning and “coffee break reflection” (Wenger, 1998) where members picked up where they had left off in previous encounters, using the email induced ‘grapevine’ as a seeding structure (Lave & Wenger, 1991). However, sub-groups did not always engage with the chair (A) and the wider ELC and in these instances, redefined practice was not integrated at community level, echoing the risks identified in Handley et al. (2006) and Morrison et al. (2004). Notably, those motivated to join the ELC through political pressures or “a sense of civic duty” tended to align themselves to particular aspects of ELC practice, volunteering to work on particular sub-committees while distancing themselves from other activities; thereby emphasising sub-group culture to the detriment of community level learning. This perspective is exemplified in the comment: “... people say that [some members of group B] are difficult to deal with but I don’t think that’s the case”, suggesting tensions between certain ELC members.

Of note are the complex layers of learner engagement within the ELC – those working and living only a short geographical distance from the ELC location (1 km radius) were reluctant to get too involved in aspects of ELC practice closely related to community development: “because I don’t live there I feel that I don’t have a right to an opinion on some subjects ... I try to leave that to people that actually live with it” creating another sub-context. Identities which developed between different sub-groups and between different learning communities also contributed to the complexity of ELC participation, as anticipated by Handley et al. (2006), and demonstrated by the comment: “... strictly speaking [the website sub-committee is] not an ELC committee, although everyone in it is an ELC member ... it certainly makes [the website development] more difficult when you have to try to keep both sides [two distinct ELCs] happy”. Observed disconnections from the wider community accelerated in the absence of shared meaning at community level

and, based on observational and documentary evidence, contributed to the disengagement of some members over time.

As established in tourism research (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000; Getz & Carlsen, 2005; Morrison & Teixeira, 2004) individual lifestyle motivations also influenced participation: “... people are coming at this from quite different aspects ... some people have very healthy businesses that they are trying to expand ... there are people who are dead against doing anything that might increase tourism in the area ... they are certainly cautious ... you have to deal with that too”. Perceived benefits also influenced levels of participation, as some members felt that the ELC “... doesn’t benefit everyone equally ... the group is predominantly made up of accommodation providers”, inferring that ELC efforts were directed to benefit one business type, namely accommodation. Of note, while half of the core group (A, B, D and H) were accommodation providers, numerous attempts were made to establish a more inclusive structure, acknowledging “... it will do no harm to have fresh people with a fresh approach”. Efforts were also made to rotate meeting times to facilitate wider inclusion as certain members were “extremely busy at this time of the day”, although frustrations resurfaced where agenda items did not directly involve some individuals. These exertions suggest an awareness of the risks associated with an insular approach to ELC engagement (Halme, 2001; Tinsley & Lynch, 2007; Wenger, 1998, 2000), and an appreciation of the value of fresh ELC interjections. There is value in noting that certain non-core (peripheral) roles were instrumental in maintaining a favourable learning dynamic in the ELC, as anticipated in the literature and presented in Table 1. For example, knowledge and idea generation behaviours were frequently observed in members that contributed sporadically to practice when they came across something they thought was of value to other ELC members: “[available training] ... I just wanted to make everyone aware of it”. These forms of participation stimulated new ideas, triggered further practice and instilled momentum in the ELC’s evolution. It is noteworthy that these contributions were only recognised and valued by a minority of ELC members, specifically those strong in the broker role.

#### 4.3. Phase three – learning community evolution

New challenges emerged as individual and collective learning moved from specific tasks to more holistic ‘learning competence and business development’ as the LC became embedded in the micro-firm tourism provider community. This was amplified by A’s resignation as chairperson to a less active role in September 2010, which precipitated a stage in the ELC’s evolution that members referred to as ‘the crisis’. During this period, active members had difficulty encouraging full ELC participation, causing frustration among the core group as exemplified in this email: “I believe we have the opportunity to make [ELC location] THE tourist destination of the [region] but it will take effort. IF WE DON’T MAKE THIS EFFORT NOW WE ARE THROWING AWAY AN ENORMOUS OPPORTUNITY”, emphasis in original extract. A flurry of email correspondence followed and an emergency general meeting (EGM) was convened, amounting to a call to arms: “... this is a crucial meeting about the future of the cooperative with some very important decisions needing to be made. It is YOUR cooperative and it needs YOUR involvement... BE PREPARED TO INVOLVE YOURSELF IN THE RUNNING OF [the ELC] BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE”. Directly following this EGM, there was a marked increase in attendance at subsequent crisis meetings and a number of previously less active and non-active members volunteered for ELC roles and sub-committee tasks. This shift demonstrated the value and importance of building shared meaning through community level strategies, albeit via a ‘crisis’ catalyst. More interestingly, when the broker (A) resigned, learner autonomy increased, reinforcing the findings of Johannisson (2000), Man (2007) and Murillo (2011), among others.

Once the ELC emerged from ‘the crisis’, members identified a number of higher level learning activities as important for ELC

sustainability and a new rotating core structure was agreed. In this period, titled 'phase two' by the ELC, a core team comprising a mix of learner identities provided a very effective action/reflection balance. Armed with a mandate "to continue" from the wider ELC, communication became more forceful and frequent, representing a move to an activity baseline, and the core team began to lay down rules of participation at community level: "A company's listing on the website is conditional to being a paid up member ... reciprocal linking of each other's website ... and submission of image or logo and wording. This has been decided by the website development team as a prerequisite to inclusion on the new website. Take a look at the site to see what the website team mean ... they are about to set some deadlines and you don't want to be left out of the site" (ELC meeting minutes). Based on prior research (Ahlström-Söderling, 2003) it is likely that such protective modifications would have hampered ELC participation and learning established in the early stages of learning community evolution, as shared meaning and legitimacy of various forms of participation had not been established.

While collective leadership enhanced engagement in phase three, an incomplete understanding of the value of established learning strategies could potentially reduce important forms of participation, as identified in Table 1. Latter stage ELC observations confirm the sub-group structure is preferred by some members due to workload and resource constraints: "[suggest] we divide the businesses into different sectors", although this approach was disputed by members who believed that community level learning infrastructure should be protected if full ELC engagement is to be

encouraged/preserved: "The word divide in a co-op may be wrong to use. I wish to suggest another way in which we could perhaps encourage membership participation ... [that would be] more innovative and exciting and in the long run more beneficial for the area". The subtle changes that individuals sought to make to the learning infrastructure confirmed that the learning value of existing strategies was not fully understood by the wider community. For example, members questioned why meeting minutes "need to be that detailed?", and these were replaced with summary notes for a time, until a secretary was appointed, indicating that the group realised the value of detailed minutes in their absence rather than presence. This would suggest that community level learning strategies need to be robust prior to phasing out learning broker support. Such strategies are noted as an important factor in the sustainability of ELCs (Bessant & Tsekouras, 2001). Nearing the end of the case study, awareness of the learning value of different forms of participation increased, and a growing realisation of the importance of succession planning was observed. Reflecting back on the crisis, members cautioned others "that's [ELC dissolution] what happens when [leadership] it's all left to one person".

#### 4.4. Proposing a model of the social dynamics of learning and participation in tourism ELCs

The literature review identified a range of social dynamics which may influence tourism micro-firm learning and participation in an evolving learning community (Table 1), while the empirical findings highlight core criteria which help to engage evolutionary

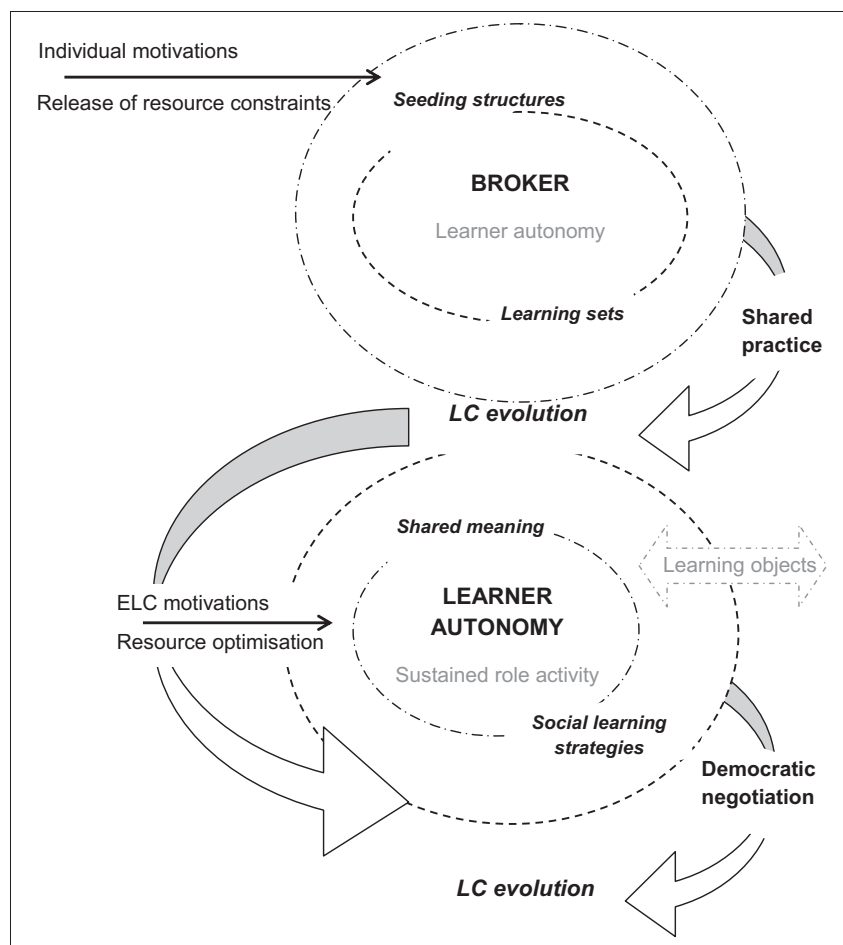


Fig. 1. The social dynamics of micro-firm learning and participation in tourism ELCs.



community level learning in such an environment. Using a social learning lens, the ELC model (Fig. 1) illustrates the social dynamics that influence learning community evolution.

As highlighted in Fig. 1, in the initial stages of LC engagement it is the broker who instigates learning activity and embeds social learning strategies in pursuit of resource release. Membership is individually motivated, and it is through a process of reciprocated engagement that seeding structures are established within the community. This activity facilitates the establishment of shared practice over time. As the LC evolves, learning competence develops among the ELC members, and ideally, the broker 'steps back' as learner autonomy is entrenched as a core activity and rotating role fulfilment is encouraged. At this stage, membership is community motivated, while resource use and value is optimised via a process of shared meaning, learning object interaction, and ultimately, social learning. The progressive nature of the LC is central to this model, facilitating continuous improvement, wherein the social dynamics of micro-firm learning evolution rests at community rather than individual level.

From a learning perspective, it is evident that a delicate balance is required between orchestrating shared practice on the one hand, and sustaining a 'learning dynamic' that can provide scope for different forms of participation on the other. In the initial stages of the case study, the learning infrastructure was robust enough to nurture ELC learning relationships and facilitate emergent learning sets. At the same time it was flexible enough to provide the opportunity for members to democratically establish shared meaning. This has been incorporated into the ELC model (Fig. 1). However the findings suggest that more robust social learning strategies, agreed through a process of democratic negotiation at community level, are required to sustain the ELC over the longer-term.

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

This paper presents the longitudinal case details relating to an evolving micro-tourism learning community situated in Ireland's south west region, and draws from a social learning perspective (Lave and Wenger, 1991) whereby learning is influenced, interpreted and constructed by members situated within the observed Community of Practice. In contributory terms, the findings demonstrate the complexity associated with creating and sustaining a social learning infrastructure in this context, and the need for awareness of social learning dynamics that influence community learning over time. While learning strategies evolved in practice, and maintained a level of participation and learning that permitted initial community interactions; it is unlikely that the ELC would have sustained momentum in the longer term without the presence of stronger learning relationships and a core group demonstrating higher level learning behaviours in the initial stages of LC construction and evolution. Therefore, phased broker facilitation is advised to encourage and establish shared meaning, as reciprocated engagement nurtures seeding structures that ultimately facilitate shared practice. Learner competence increases via these seeding structures as relationships mature, resulting in increased levels of learner autonomy. Over time membership becomes community motivated and resource value is optimised, although this view must be tempered with the balance between boundary fluidity and non-legitimised participation.

Based on the progressive nature of these learning communities, a development path is advisable to engage different forms of learning objects and learner identities and different levels of LC participation at each stage of the LC evolution. Specifically, rotational broker(s) should be nominated from the core team and should be linked closely to the co-ordination role to ensure

community level strategies are maintained. From a succession perspective, these roles should be distinct and rotated as time passes to avoid the disengagement of key members. Membership of the core team should be democratically negotiated, and subsequently challenged to identify different ELC roles and their learning value. Key regional tourism support stakeholders could participate intermittently in ELCs, to maintain a flow of learning objects and provide a regular outside-in perspective.

For practitioners keen to establish and maintain an effective ELC, community level learning strategies are required to underpin sustainable learning and participation. Democratic physical and virtual forums afford members the opportunity to establish shared meaning and shape ELC practice on their own terms. Community level communication through AGMs and the provision of detailed minutes or equivalent reciprocal tools are crucial for ELC sustainability. Notably, acknowledging the value of different forms of participation and the learning contribution of individual members should enhance participation and build a sense of community. The proposed *model of the social dynamics of micro-firm learning and participation in tourism ELCs* provides an insight into inter and intra social dynamics that influence micro-tourism learning community evolution, while proposed future research includes the study of additional ELCs, in Ireland and other countries, for the purposes of cross case/cross country comparison.

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**Leana Reinl** is learning network co-ordinator on the Green Innovation and Future Technologies (GIFT) Interreg project at Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT), Ireland. Leana's research interests include individual learning and management competency development; small / micro business learning networks and tourism learning networks. Leana has published in the *Journal of Tourism Planning and Development*; *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation* and the *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*. Prior to joining GIFT, Leana was involved in the development and delivery of a national tourism learning network initiative in Ireland and subsequent degree program (2006–2011) at WIT, while completing her PhD. Her current research focuses on small / micro firm learning network evolution.



**Felicity Kelliher** is a senior lecturer and DBA Programme Director at the School of Business, Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT), Ireland. She is co-chair of the RIKON research group at WIT, which incorporates six senior researchers and over 30 research students studying various aspects of innovation, knowledge transfer and organisational networks in SMEs. Felicity's research interests encompass small and micro firm learning and network activities on a regional basis. She has published in the *Journals of: Tourism and Hospitality Research, Tourism Planning and Development*, and *Small Business and Enterprise Development*, among others. Her current research projects focus on micro firm management capability development, cooperative activities and small firm learning networks.