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Newcomer or ‘Old Timer’?

A critical evaluation of Lave & Wenger’s theory of Communities of Practice through the use of Socratic-type dialogue

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Abstract

This is a short, informal discussion paper which examines the concepts behind Lave & Wenger’s (1991) theory of Communities of Practice and Situated Learning and reflects on how these concepts can inform our understanding of professional learning. Through the use of Socratic-type dialogue, the author uses a personal narrative to test some of the assumptions and tacit beliefs which surround situated learning, in order to identify and reflect on some of their limitations when applied in a practical setting.

Keywords: Communities of Practice; Socratic dialogue, Situated Learning

1.0 Introduction

Using Lave & Wenger’s (1991) theory of communities of practice and situated learning as its base, the aim of this paper is to critically examine and reflect upon the concepts of situated rationality and legitimate peripheral participation in order to assess how these can inform our understanding of professional learning through the process of co-constructing a personal narrative between two academics.

Written as part of a taught doctoral programme, the writer’s intention was to produce a relatively informal discussion paper which draws upon appropriate literature in order to explore how we learn in a social context. Whilst the discussion below is fictitious, it is based on an actual dialogue between the writer and a senior academic who is asked to reflect on their induction into the University. The narrative format is similar to a Socratic-type dialogue, using a series of questions and discussion to explore and reflect upon the concepts and issues surrounding situated learning.

Morrell (2004) claims dialogue is an essential tool for reflective learning as it not only allows assumptions to be identified and tested, it can also illuminate problems

associated with superficial thinking which in turn enables reflection and re-evaluation of arguments and beliefs. Reflective learning requires us to have a coherent and clearly articulated understanding of how we make sense of our lives as our memories and information are not just stored, but are storied (Bolton, 2005). These stories form a crucial element to the way we view the world around us (Boje, 2008). Bolton (2005) claims that to be effective, reflective practice requires an openness to having our understandings challenged and an acceptance of new aspects which may alter our views. A useful method of achieving this is through Socratic-type dialogue as it uses a process of questions and discussion to enable the parties involved to clarify and define their understandings of a particular concept (Chang, Lin, & Chen, 1998). Turnbull and Mullins state '*Socratic dialogue offers reflective practitioners an opportunity to develop critical thinking around themes and debates in their academic and professional areas*' (Turnbull & Mullins, 2007, p. 93). The use of Socratic dialogue to support learning can be traced back to Plato (Mitchell, 2006) and has been shown to be highly effective in creating reflective practice in many educational settings as it enables a level of philosophical questioning and understanding to develop between the parties involved (Bolton, 2005; Mitchell, 2006; Weusijana, 2007).

2.0 Dialogue

Pip Jo, thanks for agreeing to talk to me. As you know, I'm exploring the concepts of situated learning, communities of practice and legitimate peripheral participation as espoused by Lave & Wenger (1991) and I thought an interesting way to approach this would be to examine the experience of a newcomer to this University.

Jo You're welcome. I do have my own views however could you explain what you mean by these terms?

Pip In their book, '*Situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation*', Lave & Wenger put forward the concept that learning does not occur in isolation, but is a social activity situated in the real world. They define a community of practice as "*a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice ... an intrinsic condition for the*

existence of knowledge, not least because it provides the interpretive support necessary for making sense of its heritage” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98). Key to this concept is the process of legitimate peripheral participation which Gherardi, Nicolini & Odella define as “the newcomer’s progressive involvement in the community by virtue of his or her increasing mastery of the practices of the community and of his or her membership” (Gherardi, Nicolini, & Odella, 1998, p. 279). Taking Duguid’s (2005) assumption that the importance of any community of practice lies in the tacit knowledge of its members, a key objective for any newcomer is to acquire that shared knowledge and understanding.

Jo OK, well I have some issues with these concepts. Firstly, whilst I agree learning can be situated, it can also be an individual activity as people approach learning in different ways for various reasons (Hodkinson, 2005). Also, like Roberts (2006) I feel it is essential to determine where the boundaries of a community of practice reside. If, as is often assumed, the boundary is departmental (Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson, & Unwin, 2005) I agree I need to learn about the working practices within the Business School. However, I have extensive experience of Further and Higher Education, therefore I would argue that I am already an established member of a much wider external academic community of practice (Fuller et al., 2005). Taking this further, I’m not sure I view this wider community of practice as just one entity; it is more like a network or constellation of communities of practice which overlap, complement and compete with one another and which allow members to pass between them (Roberts, 2006). Indeed, I suspect my knowledge and experience from this wider network was key to me being offered my post (Fuller et al., 2005). The definition of legitimate peripheral participation put forward by Gherardi et al (1998) appears to ignore prior knowledge, viewing all newcomers as novices following a similar path of learning (Fuller et al., 2005). I may not be fully socialised into the Business School, however it would be short-sighted to assume the values, interests and knowledge which have shaped me have no impact on the learning process I adopt (Bloomer, Hodkinson, & Billett, 2004)! I would further argue that the level I’ve been brought in at, and the flexibility I’ve been afforded, implies that rather than wanting me to comply with current working practices, the University expects me to drive Business School working practices forward to ensure

they remain competitive (Fox, 2000), therefore the learning process is clearly bidirectional (Bloomer et al., 2004).

As I joined late in the academic year I have faced a temporary barrier in being socialised into the Business School's community of practice. However, the canonical nature of the University's induction process, with its strict adherence to documented procedures (Brown & Duguid, 1996), has proved invaluable in showing me how the formal systems and power structures have influenced the nature of its communities of practice (Fuller et al., 2005). The high degree of autonomy afforded me, has meant I can network fairly extensively thus enabling me to learn about what is happening elsewhere within the University (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004)!

Pip Can you explain?

Jo Through networking I have been able to explore the University's communities of practice which has enabled me to explore people's expectations and activities so start fitting the pieces of the jigsaw together (Brown & Duguid, 1996). As Duguid states "*learning throws light on the importance of the tacit for dealing with codified knowledge*" (Duguid, 2005, p. 111). By 'tapping' into the tacit knowledge of the University's other communities of practice I am learning about opportunities which could benefit both the Business School and the University.

Pip The University?

Jo A community of practice cannot exist in a vacuum (Roberts, 2006)! Like other universities, this University could be criticised for having a silo mentality. However, what I've seen and heard so far shows me it wants to address this. It is essential that the University's communities of practice work together so that they can take advantage of potential opportunities which present themselves (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004). We cannot forget that organizations operate in dynamic environments, therefore organizational learning must follow this (Engeström, 2001).

To succeed in my new role, I need to identify potential ongoing cross-university ideas and initiatives that I can engage in and contribute to (Zuboff et al., 1991). If we

accept the general consensus that learning takes place in a social context, often face to face (Duguid, 2005; Schön, 1979; Wenger, 1999) it follows that any newcomer must meet people to find out what is happening. Like Gherardi et al. (1998) I believe the onus is on the individual to create their own learning opportunities, so I've attended various meetings and events, observing and listening to develop an understanding of how the University operates and is changing (Zuboff et al., 1991). To date this has proved to be fairly easy as, unlike other institutions whose communities of practice have been less open, the people I've met here appear welcoming and disposed (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004) to 'scaffolding' their tacit knowledge (Gherardi et al., 1998).

Pip Have you faced any difficulties as a newcomer?

Jo The only area I've struggled with is the internal market of the institution itself. The University does not place a high value on supporting its internal customer. If you want or need something, it takes forever to happen, if at all.

Pip I can relate to that too! Moving on, amongst others, Contu & Willmott's (2003) claim that the progress of situated learning is strongly determined by the power relationships in place, and how these are exercised. With this in mind, how easy have you found it to gain access to key sources?

Jo As mentioned earlier, where they can, people have provided me with what I've asked for. However, the formal systems are difficult and unwieldy which impacts on your ability to accomplish work and learning (Fox, 2000). There is a great deal of goodwill present but the systems supporting the internal customer need more development.

Pip Do you think this has an impact on the internal community of practice?

Jo Yes, I think it does, it certainly does in terms of situated learning. This is evidenced by the number of stories I've heard regarding this issue. Like the Xerox technicians in Orr's study (cited in Contu & Willmott, 2003), colleagues across the University have recounted stories of having to resort to non-canonical practices to

take advantage of opportunities (Brown & Duguid, 1996). All the tacit knowledge and experience I've learnt so far relates to difficulties faced when trying to move things forward. The mythology coming through these stories highlights two key issues: the inflexibility of the internal systems and the role of the senior team. I've been told that things will happen very slowly and without the support of the most senior people, will not happen at all. Situated learning is therefore clearly affected both by the people and the systems that are in place (Fox, 2000). These are stories so I need to test them out. I'm not disbelieving them; the early indications are that there might be something in what people are saying. A year down the road I will be able to confirm or disconfirm it.

Pip I suppose this is part of the process of situated learning?

Jo Yes, and from my first few months what I've learnt is this University's strength is its people and their viewpoints. At least here, people feel free to express their opinions and don't hold back. They have told me of the good things and the more negative things, and that's refreshing. There is at least one thing that is healthier here than other places I've worked, even if it is dissent!

3.0 Conclusion

This paper demonstrates how a Socratic-type dialogue can be used to critically examine and reflect upon some of the key concepts of situated learning and their practical application. In particular it challenges the implied assumption of Gherardi et al (1998) that legitimate peripheral participants provide limited if any learning for an established community of practice and that the learning taking place is likely to be in one direction. If we accept Engeström's (2001) assertion that communities of practice are human activity systems which are interlinked and interdependent upon one another and which form part of larger communities of practice operating in a dynamic environment, it follows that they must continually adapt and change in order to survive. Newcomers (or legitimate peripheral participants) from this wider community provide an invaluable source of knowledge and learning which can benefit the communities of practice they join. As such learning must be bi-directional.

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