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Learning across communities of practice: how postgraduate students cope with returning to higher education in an international setting

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Abstract

This paper is an exploratory case study into the way postgraduate students cope with the transition from the workplace to university in an international environment. It looks at how students move successfully between these two communities of practice, and the kind of learning that is involved in this process. As well as personal motivation, key factors found in boundary-crossing between the communities are multi-membership of communities and the use of identity as a bridge. Learning is found to involve a collateral transfer, or reconstruction, of knowledge in both directions. The study is intended to inform the development of a learning support program to help postgraduate students improve their learning process.

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Learning across communities of practice: How postgraduate students cope with returning to higher education in an international setting

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Abstract: This paper is an exploratory case study into the way postgraduate students cope with the transition from the workplace to university in an international environment. It looks at how students move successfully between these two communities of practice, and the kind of learning that is involved in this process. As well as personal motivation, key factors found in boundary-crossing between the communities are multi-membership of communities and the use of identity as a bridge. Learning is found to involve a collateral transfer, or reconstruction, of knowledge in both directions. The study is intended to inform the development of a learning support program to help postgraduate students improve their learning process.

Keywords: social practice theory; learning; postgraduate education

Introduction

An increasing number of universities today are expanding within and beyond their country of origin as a means of attracting a wider student body. This is particularly evident in postgraduate education which is becoming an important source of income for some universities. A key area of this kind of university expansion is the field of international business management, especially in offshore university development. My interest in international postgraduate education comes from a learning development perspective. The institution where I work has a large number of postgraduate students who are from a wide range of cultural, educational and occupational backgrounds. These students are nearly all working and studying at the same time, and I wanted to discover if there were any particular personal attributes or artifacts which enabled successful boundary crossing between work and higher education, and also what kind of learning was involved in the process. My case study takes a qualitative approach and is based on social practice theories of learning, particularly communities of practice. I interviewed students who were successful in their studies and who managed to combine work and postgraduate studies to good effect. My intention is to use this case study to inform the design of a learning support program to aid the transition from work to university for those of our students who have difficulty with this process. This case study and its findings will be useful to universities who are following similar development programs in overseas countries, and who wish to better serve their students.

Background

The institution in which this study takes place is an offshore campus of an Australian university situated in the Middle East. The country where this campus is located, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has undergone a recent period of rapid economic growth, which has included large-scale development in the field of higher education. This has been actively encouraged by the UAE Ministry of Higher Education, especially private higher education. The demographic balance of the country is somewhat unusual, with over 75% of the

population being expatriates (Middle East Online, 2004). This expatriate community is growing annually and provides an important market for private sector postgraduate higher education. The Ministry for Higher Education seeks to regulate the private higher education sector through its own system of accreditation. Currently there are almost 50 such private institutions, around half of which are accredited (UAE Ministry of Education, n.d.). This is in a country with an estimated population of 4.1 million (Middle East Online, 2004).

The institution discussed in this study is housed in the newly-created 'Knowledge Village', along with 13 other higher education institutions from a wide range of overseas countries. Currently the institution in question is the largest at Knowledge Village, and has around 2,000 students from approximately 72 nationalities; over half of which are postgraduate. Although there is such a strong presence of higher education institutions in the country, the degrees on offer, especially at postgraduate level tend to be mainly limited to the fields of business and information technology.

Methodology

Wenger describes communities of practice as something more than just a work group, they are centred around 'practice', which he claims is always social practice:

> The concept of practice connotes doing, but not just doing in and of itself. It is doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do. In this sense, practice is always social practice (1998, p.47).

This concept of practice involves the explicit, such as procedures, documents and language, as well at the tacit, such as shared world views, intuitions and underlying assumptions. Thus, communities of practice are a means of shared learning. In social practice theories of learning the individual and the social world cannot be separated (Lave, 1993, p.5). Learning is not possible outside the social world: "there is no such thing as "learning" *sui generis*, but only changing participation in the culturally designed settings of everyday life" (Lave, 1993, p.6). Lave and Wenger focus on the relational nature of learning and describe social practice theory as emphasising the "relational interdependency of agent and world, activity, meaning, cognition, learning, and knowing" (p.50). Thus, they view learning as something which automatically takes place within communities of practice rather than something which is done in a formalized, institutional way. Indeed, they have little time for formal learning such as that found in higher education.

While we accept that learning takes place within communities of practice, we must not assume that learning is confined to one community of practice. Learning can occur across communities as we engage in multi-membership. Wenger (1998) talks about connections between communities of practice and describes boundary objects and brokers as making those connections. Boundary objects include such things as artifacts, concepts, specific terms and documents. The concept of identity is crucial to the idea of boundary crossing.

In order to deal successfully with boundaries it is essential to be able to open up our identities to other ways of seeing the world, and it is through our identities that communities and boundaries are recognized as experiences of the world (Wenger, 2000). Brokers are people who use their multi-membership of communities to transfer aspects of one practice into another. People who act as brokers are able to make new connections and enable coordination. Some people are natural brokers and often appear to prefer being at the edges,

or periphery of many communities of practice, rather than being at the centre. They use their identity to act as a bridge between communities, both for themselves and for others.

The notion of transfer, or reconstruction, of learning from a situated view of learning deals with the transfer of participatory processes across situations, rather than the application of knowledge from one situation into another (Tuomi-Grohn & Engestrom, 2003, p.25). Wenger deals with the issue of transfer of knowledge across communities of practice and the negotiation of boundaries by using the communities themselves as the unit of analysis. Engestrom, in his work on activity theory (2001), claims that this boundary crossing causes conflict and so allows what he terms 'expansive learning' to take place. In his cycle of expansive learning, learning is initiated by the questioning of contradictions in existing practice. This leads to the discovery of secondary contradictions, or a double bind, which prompts the need for modeling of a new situation, and ultimately the creation of a new practice which is free of the conflicts and contradictions of the old situation. Boundary crossing involves the collective formation of new concepts and "entails stepping into unfamiliar domains" because it is "essentially a creative endeavour which requires new conceptual resources" (Engestrom et al, 1995, p.333). Beach, on the other hand, sees the relation between an individual and social activities as the basis for the transfer, or generalization of knowledge. He refers to this link between identity and knowledge 'propagation' as "consequential transition" (2003, p.42). He talks about transitions as developmental for the individual as well as involving the active construction, or propagation, of knowledge across social space and time.

The traditional view of transfer of knowledge and expertise as being a vertical process is challenged by some social practice theories of learning. A new, horizontal view is being developed from which the notion of polycontextuality is emerging, along with the concept of boundary crossing. Polyconextuality involves members of a work group being involved in multiple on-going tasks within an activity as well as being increasingly engaged in multiple communities of practice (Engestrom et al, 1995). In this way, boundary crossing can be said to involve reconstructing knowledge rather than simply transferring it. Beach (2003) describes a horizontal view of knowledge transfer, or transition, which he terms 'collateral transition' as opposed to the traditional lateral kind of transition, which he says is not enough to explain the multi-faceted nature of social activity in which individuals are often involved. The notion of collateral transitions refers to an individual's participation in simultaneous, historically-related activities, such as part-time work whilst at school, or part-time studying whilst working.

Data gathering

In order to discover the experiences of students who have successfully undertaken postgraduate studies whilst working, a sample of five participants were interviewed, all of whom were identified as successful MBA students; that is consistently gaining the higher grades in all their subjects. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and lasted about thirty minutes each. A list of questions was used relating to participants' workplace and university communities of practice, and the relationship between the two communities. Participants were encouraged to elaborate and give personal accounts. Three of the participants were male and two female. They varied in age and were from five different nationalities.

Participant 1 worked as a Field Service Manager for an airline company, Participant 2 was the Regional Manager for a systems network integration company, Participant 3 worked in the marketing department of an insurance company, Participant 4 was the Brand Manager for an advertising agency, and Participant 5 was a teacher in Information Technology at a Higher College of Technology.

Data analysis

When the participants were asked why they chose to take up a postgraduate degree it became clear that they were involved in the cycle of expansive learning as described by Engestrom (2001). In some cases this was as a result of an acknowledged questioning of existing practice as was the case with Participant 4 who expressed her double bind at her workplace thus:

> The management was so poor that I really wanted to find out is there a better way to manage people ... is there a better way of doing things ...?

In other cases, the questioning was not so explicitly recognized by the participant, but was nevertheless evident from the way they described how their university studies informed their practice. For example, Participant 2 explains that,

> I used to do things because I've seen somebody do it that way … now I do things because I know, I know the whole picture.

Thus, there was a desire to know more about why certain practices were in place. However, for most of the participants there was little evidence of the conflict Engestrom usually associates with expansive learning. They did not really express the kind of frustration or 'discoordinations' with the contradictions they found in their work practices that is deemed a necessary part of the cycle of expansive learning (Engestrom, 2001, p.145). Instead, the move to the university community seems to have been a means of enhancing their work experience. This finding echoes that of a similar study of working postgraduate students in an online learning environment (Stacey, et al, 2004), in which it was found that, overall, the enhancements arising from being involved in simultaneous workplace and learning communities outweighed the disruptions experienced by the participants.

All the participants had multiple-membership of communities of practice in their workplace which led to multi-tasking and polycontextuality. Indeed, most participants described this aspect of their work as the most rewarding. Participants 1 and 2 both said their main motivation at work was the constant challenges they faced and the opportunity this gave them for problem-solving:

> Q: What would you say your main motivation in your job is?
> A: The challenges ... challenges I have my daily basis. We don't have routine type of job, even though the actions might sound the same. But, since we're dealing with customers with different needs and different backgrounds from different industries, so our approach to them is completely different and we always have a different challenge for the different customers. We always have problems to solve, or I should say, challenges. This is what keeps me motivated. We always create ... we always try to find what's the best way to approach the customer ... it's very competitive, so it's a very dynamic environment ... (Participant 2).

In this context taking on a postgraduate degree was seen as just another challenge, and moving to the university just another addition to participation in an already wide range of communities of practice.

Not surprisingly, all the participants expressed their high degree of personal motivation to undertake further studies, and this appeared to be a key factor in their success:

> Q: What would you say your main motivation is for studying …?
> A: Definitely the big hunger for updated knowledge and then upgrading my skills, wanting to move on and get maybe a different job in a multinational company (Participant 4).

> Q: So what your main motivation was … to broaden your horizons, did you say that?
> A: Yes, absolutely … and although … mm … the qualification itself can bring financial rewards, it satisfies my professional job for me. I did it for me. I get very frustrated when I sit in meetings and things like that, I don't understand what people are talking about. So, I purely did it for me . I was already doing this job before I got my MBA … in one way I didn't need the MBA … in some ways, but for me I need it. I want it (Participant 1).

This high level of motivation reflected their motivation in their jobs and was coupled with the ability to work hard, both at work and in their studies. All the participants said that their jobs entailed working long and irregular hours, and that they recognized the need to apply that same work ethic to their studies. Thus, personal drive and ambition was a key feature in enabling successful boundary crossing between the workplace and the university.

The participants' success as students was also evidently due in part to their ability to create their own personal bridges across communities by using their identity and experience in the workplace to inform their work as students. However, they also all described how they were able to use their identity as a student to develop and change their role in the workplace, so the boundary crossing and transfer was in both directions. For example, Participant 3 described her changed attitude towards her manager as a result of her studies:

> … because I thought he was crazy in the beginning, I thought … what's going on with this place, but then, when I learned, I understood where exactly he was coming from … this is a magic happening …

She goes on to describe how her work patterns have changed to include logical thinking and contingency planning. The knowledge she has gained through her studies has increased her confidence and allowed her to experience "other ways of being in the world" (Wenger, 2000, p.239). The other participants all expressed similar changes in their workplace identities as a result of their studies. There was also evidence of participants acting as brokers. Two out of the five participants were clearly natural brokers. Participant 5 even described himself as a "fifth wheel" (i.e. often at the periphery) when he was talking about his membership of multiple communities. He was able to act explicitly as a broker for his fellow students because of his experience in higher education. He describes how was able to help his group prepare and give a presentation which met the requirements of the course better than those of some of the other students,

> … the professors were usually very impressed with that … because, you know, a lot of people get up and just talk, but mine, my group, would always have an activity that would make, you know, activate the learning a little better.

From the interviews there was plenty of evidence of the horizontal nature of knowledge reconstruction, particularly collateral transfer as described by Beach (2003). This involved the reconstruction of knowledge in both directions; from the workplace to the university, and vice versa. The participants were all aware of how their work situations informed their studies, and described how they transferred some of the participatory processes from work, particularly in working as part of a team and approaches to problem-solving, to the university situation. One of the most important features of the experience of the participants was the impact their studies had on their job. In all cases, except with the teacher, participants described how their studies were directly related to their jobs. They felt that through their studies they came to get a better understanding of their jobs and the way in which organizations work. They felt very strongly that they were able to relate theory to practice and vice versa:

> Well, as I said, first when you go back to university … go into research … and writing assignments, and thinking outside the box … that's the first thing that helps you in your job, because you start approaching the problems and the issues that you have at work the same way [as you do at university], by taking one step back and trying to cover all the elements (Participant 2).

> To start with it helps you understand work better. Er … second is when you start thinking of new ways to do things, … mmm … for example, we had to do a media plan, I was, like, gosh … how do I do it? And then, it's clear … then I saw a media plan and I just picked up the entry … and started filling it up and it came up very well. So, understanding work in terms of setting things down, setting processes … all that helps you if you have a theory background (Participant 3).

Yet, their studies were not simply theoretical, they involved case studies which participants were able to base directly in their own experience, therefore knowledge transfer was enhanced in both directions. They all said their attitude to work and their work practices had changed as a result of their studies. One participant felt that what she had learnt had had a direct influence on her leaving her company to find one that she felt was run properly.

Conclusion

The fact that the participants were generally at ease with their multi-membership of communities at work was significant in aiding their successful move to the university community. Stacey, et al (2004) found a similar situation in their study of online postgraduate learners, as several of their participants moved easily and with a "sense of fulfillment from one community to another". They describe these participants as successfully exploiting "the synergy that resulted from multi-membership of communities of practice". The participants in my study described a similar kind of synergy, which also seemed to exist between their strong personal motivation and their involvement in communities of practice.

The transfer of learning which the participants described appears to be of a horizontal nature; Beach's 'collateral transition', in that they were involved in simultaneous activities which were related to each other, and there was a very definite two-way movement of learning between the workplace and the university. From the experiences of the participants it is clear that the formal learning they undertook at the university had a significant impact on their workplace situation and learning. This belies Lave and Wenger's (1991) dismissal of formal education, and, as Fuller et al (2005) found, shows that formal learning can sometimes be an integral part of wider learning in a community of practice.

It is with this notion in mind that the findings of this case study will be used as a starting point for developing a learning support program which explicitly focuses on the reconstruction of learning between the university and the workplace. In addition, this study suggests that academics can help their postgraduate students in making the transition from work to university by encouraging the two-way reconstruction of knowledge and acknowledging the importance of workplace experience in postgraduate university studies.

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