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## **“Would you like coffee?”**

*Using the researcher’s insider and outsider positions as a sensitizing concept in a cross-organisational field study*

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## **“Would you like coffee?”**

*Using the researcher’s insider and outsider positions as a sensitizing concept in a cross-organisational field study*

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how the notions of insidership and outsidership serve as a sensitizing concept (Blumer 1954) in the analysis of cross-organisational learning.

The paper is based on an ethnographic field study on learning and innovation in the social and health care educations in Denmark. The social and health care studies are part of the Vocational Education System (VET), which combines coursework at a college and internship in the elder care sector. Throughout their education, the students are required to adapt to new organisational cultures, learning environments and work tasks as they alternate from school to workplaces. Equally, the teachers and workplace supervisors frequently cross organisational boundaries in order to support the students’ learning and wellbeing.

Crossing organisational boundaries is often conceptualized as fertile for learning

and innovation, because different perspectives meet, and habits are challenged (Engeström 2003). Additionally, recent literature on innovation in the public sector emphasises collaboration across traditional governmental, organisational, and professional boundaries because it opens the innovation cycle to a variety of actors and taps into a variety of innovation resources (Bommert 2010).

Both the VET system and the elder care sector encounter demands for innovation, and the overall research project aims at producing new knowledge on public innovation from empirical studies of boundary crossing. This knowledge is important in order to create expansive learning environments (Engeström 2003) and involve many different actors and stakeholders into innovation processes.

The researcher position is by nature interactive, which makes it impossible to predict or control (Cassell 2005). In the paper I argue that the actors' positions in the cross-organisational field are subject to similar unpredictability and resistance to control. Analysing the actors as temporary insiders and outsiders from the perspective of my own temporary positions as a field researcher, turned out to be a strong interpretive device in my attempt to understand learning possibilities and innovation in a cross-organisational field.

## **Introduction**

In 2010, I began an ethnographic field study in the social and health care educations in Denmark. As these educations are part of the vocational education and training system (VET), the study is carried out in a cross-organisational field including a social and health care college and a number of workplaces in the elder care sector where students work as trainees. Before entering into the field

as a researcher, I worked as a manager at the college, and in my working life previous to that I was involved in VET as an educational consultant and as a teacher. I therefore regarded myself as an insider researcher and consulted the literature on insider research (Merton 1972; Griffith 1998; Mercer 2007). Additionally, I was aware of my lack of knowledge about working in the elder care sector, and I expected to be positioned as an outsider when the field observations were carried out at the workplaces. Unexpectedly, the notions of insider and outsidership turned out to be much more complex, fluid and unpredictable.

This paper explores insidership and outsidership through my own experience of shifting insider and outsider positions. Through this exploration, I make use of the notion of the ethnographer's 'professional amazement' (Hastrup 2011) as a way of sensitizing myself to the field.

Furthermore, Blumer's notion of 'sensitizing concepts' (Blumer 1954), focused my analysis of the empirical data, and made me realize that insider and outsider positions were at stake in subtle ways. Thus, the notion of insider and outsidership as a sensitizing concept added valuable insight into the dynamics of collaboration in a cross-organisational field. In this paper, I present my encounter with the student, Peter, and *coffee*, which turned out to be an artefact with power extending beyond keeping me awake.

Firstly, I give an account of my first day as a field researcher. Secondly, I relate the paper to the literature of insider research and boundary crossing. Thirdly, methodological considerations are made by the use of the professional amazement and sensitizing concepts. Empirical data is presented concurrently. Finally, I sum up the main finding that apparently insignificant or almost

invisible artefacts, signs and gestures have the power to position actors as insiders or outsiders, including myself as a field researcher.

## **Morning meeting without coffee**

My very first day of field study at an elder care centre turned out to be a long one without coffee until the afternoon. This is a snippet from my field notes:

I get up one and a half hours earlier than I am used to in order to attend the morning meeting at the elder care centre. I manage to arrive ten minutes in advance. I have an appointment with a student supervisor, and when she notices me in the corridor, she gets up and meets me outside the staff room. She tells me that her student is off sick, and that I should go home, in her opinion. I tell her that I would like to stay if it is okay. She says: Come on in then, and have a cup of coffee, but after that I would like you to go home. I take a seat at the table where about 15 staff members are having coffee. It seems impolite to help myself at the coffee dispenser, and nobody pays attention to me, so for my part it turns out to become a morning meeting without coffee.

I was tired, I admit, and coffee would have been nice. But what really amazed me in both a professional and a personal sense was the feeling of awkwardness. As a consultant and as a teacher I am experienced in meeting new people, and I did not doubt my ability to connect and interact with new people in new contexts. What I did not expect was the embodied discomfort of being rejected or just ignored, and that such discomfort would paralyse me. Initially, it made me doubt my own capability as a field researcher; maybe I was too shy to manage? However, over the next six months, my field notes about unexpected and rapidly changing feelings of being an insider or an outsider piled up. An analytical theme had emerged.

## Learning at the boundaries

According to the theory of situated learning, people have to join a community and initiate the learning process at the periphery. 'The mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community' (Lave & Wenger 1991:29). Learning is a process of social participation, and *access* to routines, norms and work tasks is crucial for the learning process. When more than one organisation or 'community of practice' is involved, as in VET, students are at the periphery of new communities of practice several times during their education. Similarly, educators at the college and at the workplaces face the periphery as they meet to collaborate. From an activity theoretical perspective (Engeström 1987) the notion of "boundary crossing" refers to activities in which people from different organisations engage mutually in the reconstruction of knowledge and skills and learn new competences during these processes. A prerequisite for learning is access to interaction with other members and artifacts in the field (Elkjær 2005). Thus, learning is 'an ongoing, relational and reconstructive process' in the 'dynamics of strangeness and legitimacy.' (Tanggaard 2007:459).

## Insider and outsider research

An insider may be defined as a researcher who has a lived familiarity with the group being researched, while the outsider is 'a researcher who does not have any intimate knowledge of the group being researched, prior to entry into the group' (Griffith 1998:361). However, much literature on insider research rejects the insider/outsider dichotomy and states that 'individuals have not a single

status, but a status set' (Merton 1972:22). Educational research is often characterized by similarities between the researcher and the researched, and the number of researchers conducting research in their own workplace has increased during the last 25 years (Mercer 2007). However, researching your own organisation does not make you a permanent insider researcher. Rather, the boundaries between the researcher as an insider and as an outsider are better understood in terms of a continuum with multiple dimensions (Mercer 2007:4). Some dimensions such as gender and age are stable, while other dimensions are provided by the time and place of the research (Mercer 2007:13):

"Insiderness depends, rather, upon the intersection of many different characteristics, some inherent and some not. The researcher's relationship with the researched is not static, but fluctuates constantly, shifting back and forth along a continuum of possibilities, from one moment to the next, from one location to the next, from one interaction to the next, and even from one discussion topic to the next."

Thus, insider and outsider positions are fluid, unstable and even unpredictable. As mentioned, my first experience with the position as an outsider at the morning meeting was not unpredictable as such, and to some extent I expected it. What I did not expect was the way in which this outsider position provided me with embodied experience that sensitized me to a more general insider/outsider theme in the field. From my field diary:

At the morning meeting, I realize that the guy next to me is another student, Peter, and he agrees that I follow him at his work tasks during the day. Peter has no supervisor to work with that day; he is expected to 'latch on to different staff', as he puts it. However, he does not latch on to anyone, and at nine o'clock he has finished the morning care of the three residents he is responsible for. I ask him

about the schedule of the day, but nothing has been planned, he tells me. In need of sleep and caffeine, I can hardly cope with the prospect of six hours of idleness until three o'clock when Peter is free.

However, as time dragged that day, it turned out that my outsider position provided me with some valuable empirical data – and even with a cup of coffee.

## **Professional amazement and sensitizing concepts**

Before we consult my field notes once more, I will introduce the applied methodological concepts. I regard professional amazement (Hastrup 1992) as the field researcher's sensitive attitude and deliberate alienation while being in the field. Similarly, I regard the notion of a sensitizing concept (Blumer 1954) as an analytical tool in the subsequent phases of organizing the field notes. The researcher can be regarded as a newcomer in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991), and the newcomer position provides particular learning opportunities. This implies that researchers cannot simply apply analytical theories to an empirical field, but they can challenge their own categorizations and theories while learning in the empirical field (Hasse 2011:24). Thus, the researcher's *meeting* with the empirical field plays the main role. This meeting can be captured by means of a sensitizing concept, which 'gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances' (Blumer 1954:7). Blumer (p. 9) points out that:

“... sensitizing concepts, even though they are grounded in sense instead on explicit objective traits, can be formulated and communicated. This is done little by formal definition and certainly not by setting bench marks. It is accomplished instead by exposition, which yields a meaningful picture, abetted by apt



illustrations, which enables one to grasp the reference in terms of one's own experience."

Using my own experience as an analytical lens, I will now turn to the empirical data again, trying to create 'apt illustrations' of my field study with Peter at the elder care centre.

## Decoding the right expression

With no scheduled activities, Peter and I spend the rest of the day talking:

He really likes talking to the residents, he tells me, but he finds it difficult to interact with the staff. He wants feedback, but nobody tells him if he performs well. In the afternoon, he asks me if I would like a cup of coffee and I gratefully accept. "I must learn to express myself differently", he tells me. "I am here to see how the land lies and learn a new way of communicating. Maybe I have insulted some people here because I said: I don't get it because the book says something else. Yesterday, at the introductory meeting, they suggested this new expression: *to wonder*. I have written it down in order to practice and make it sound right. And then I will try to say: *I wonder*. It's important that I learn to express myself in a more feminine way, I guess.

This reflection can be interpreted as Peter's attempt to become a member of the community, become an insider. By replacing 'I don't get it' with 'I wonder', Peter suggests that he will not insult the staff and still be able to position himself as a curious and teachable student. However, I sense a twinge of irony in Peter's statement, and that may be one of the reasons why he seems to be stuck in an outsider position, as the next field note excerpt shows.

## Struggle at the introductory meeting

My next field observation at the elder care centre derives from the manager's office:

I arrive ten minutes in advance and have a chat with the manager, Sue. She asks me if I would like to talk to a new project coordinator and hands me his e-mail address. At the meeting table there are four cups, a coffee pot, milk and sugar. The supervisor, Eleanor, arrives, we sit down and the coffee pot is circulated. Peter was present a moment ago, but now he has disappeared. Sue asks where he went, and Eleanor says that he got scared, and now he doesn't want to participate. They laugh. Peter arrives with a cup of tea and they ask him if he feels well again. "I don't drink tea because I was ill", he says, "nor to get slim thighs." Eleanor and Sue don't respond. Usually he is never ill, so the new bacterial environment probably caused the sick leave, he says. Eleanor says that a period of sick leave is common when people arrive in a new environment. Peter says that he was there when Henrik passed away, and he is happy about that, because he has had many conversations with Henrik. He felt comfortable with joining the relatives and talking with them when they arrived. Sue says that it is impressive that he talked with the relatives. Peter replies that it felt natural and it was a good day, in that sense.

During this part of the conversation, Peter mentions a success that positions him as a skilled employee, an insider, who is capable of handling the death of a resident. He seems to reject the credit implied in 'impressive' and prefers the expression 'natural', which indicates that he wants to be considered a full member of the community. However, he does not succeed, as we will learn from the following field note:

Eleanor says that she feels they have talked it through and adds that talking things through is important. "There are no stupid questions, and it is allowed to ask the same question more than once. You must *wonder*, so we can *wonder* and

question what we do”, she says. Peter asks Eleanor for her opinion about his work. “Well”, Eleanor replies. [Pause]. Peter tells us that Eleanor has stated that he *talks*. Eleanor says that he must *ask*. “You are a student, so don’t get me wrong, it is a positive statement,” she says.

During this conversation, Peter struggles for an insider position as an employee, but the supervisor keeps positioning him in an outsider position as a student. She emphasizes ‘asking questions’ and ‘wondering’ as desirable student speech acts, while Peter asks for feedback on his performance. He does not receive any, as Eleanor’s only reply is ‘well’, which seems to be the beginning of a sentence. However, nothing follows. Instead he is assigned to the desired peripheral student position of wondering and asking questions.

## Concluding remarks

During the two field observations, insider and outsider positions are played out and negotiated in diverse ways. My first encounter with Peter is framed by our shared outsider position. The first person noticing me asks me to leave, and Peter is the only person who offers me coffee and company. The routines at the morning meeting are unknown to me, and I feel even more paralysed in the residents’ huge living room. Due to these unfamiliar routines and rooms, I am sensitized to the student’s position and learn from my bodily experience how it might feel to be a newcomer student. Some apparently simple acts such as drawing a cup of coffee from the dispenser or talking to an elderly resident feels awkward, and I am grateful when Peter reduces my feeling of awkwardness and provides me with valuable information for my research project. Thus, our shared

outsider position is established through time abundance and limited access to staff and work tasks.

My second visit is framed in a totally different way. The manager takes her time to chat with me and relate to my research project as she offers me new information and network. The small office and the meeting setup are familiar to me, and the fact that four coffee cups are set out indicates that I was expected. Despite the fact that I arrive midmorning just to attend this meeting, I am immediately positioned as an insider. Thus, I am already in a safe position at the table with a full cup of coffee, witnessing the staff making fun of the student, when he arrives as the last participant. This day, Peter is an outsider on his own.

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