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Making sense of the learning that occurred within a research collaboration

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Abstract

Making sense of the learning that occurred within a research collaboration

This paper presents our sense-making of the learning that has occurred during a collaborative research partnership. The concept of 'communities of practice' and a discourse perspective on learning and identity inform the paper. Our collaboration originated in a conversation and a concern which brought us together. This concern focused on our unease with current approaches to teaching and assessing reflective practice. We agreed to undertake a collaborative research project and in 2014 we received a Researcher Development Grant from the British Academy of Management (BAM). Our teaching and research interests are aligned in that we teach and research reflective practice at a variety of levels, from undergraduate to Doctoral level. We would consider ourselves to be reflective practitioners and collaborating on the BAM research project provided an opportunity to turn the critical lens on ourselves; as educators and researchers. In doing so we were aware of the gap identified by Bell & Thorpe (2013:105) that: '*despite elaborate theorising, there is relatively little published research in which reflexivity, or even reflection appears to be practiced to any significant extent*'. Our aim in this paper, and the conference presentation, is to contribute to this gap by sharing our reflections of participating in this research collaboration.

Word count: 1,444

The collaboration as a discursive community of practice

The concept of communities of practice, often attributed to Lave and Wenger (1991) and developed by, amongst others, (Brown and Duguid, 1991, Lave, 1993, Chaklin and Lave, 1993) has focused our attention on situated learning, arguing that learning is fundamentally a social process. Situated learning involves engagement in communities of practice and participation in these communities becomes the fundamental process of learning. The concept has become influential in education, management and social sciences and currently is one of the most articulated and developed concepts within social theories of learning. It has been enthusiastically taken up both by academics and practitioners and an examination of web pages and journal publications indicates the range of fields where notions of communities of practice are drawn on. For example, a google scholar search on: 'management and community of practice, since 2015' provided over 28,000 results; a search on: 'discourse and community, since 2015' provided over 10, 000 results.

Lave and Wenger (1991:98) define a community of practice as: *'a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice.'* While the concept of a community of practice remains fruitful it has given rise to concerns regarding consensus and pressures to conform. Critical scholars (Vince, 2014, Sambrook and Willmott, 2014) argue for an interpretation of social learning which can take account of differences in order to understand the interplay among emotion and power.

A discourse perspective opens up this prospect by studying the discursive practices of a community and the language resources participants' use. The focus is therefore on how people use the available discourses flexibly in creating and negotiating representations of the world and identities in talk-in-interaction. This enables a focus on the language-in use within a community. A discourse perspective highlights how the self is talked about, how it is theorised in discourse and the discursive functions served by alternative interpretations. These alternative representatives or 'subject positions' can be defined as 'locations' within a conversation, the identities made relevant by specific ways of talking, (Edley, 2001). 'Positioning' therefore involves a process of negotiation, as people actively take up positions within different and sometimes competing interpretative repertoires. Lawless et al. (2012) draw attention to the identity work undertaken by students on a Master of Arts programme. They discuss eight subject positions: 1) the academic practitioner; 2) frustrated practitioner researcher; 3) deep thinking performer; 4) politically aware and politically active; 5) powerful boundary worker; 6) personally empowered; 7) emancipatory practitioner and 8) personally empowered but disengaged. These subject positions provide a useful starting point to make sense of the reflective learning accounts we have produced during the BAM collaboration.

Making sense: material and data

We have shared our written reflections with each other after each meeting and we have all, to varying extents, maintained a reflective diary. We have also recorded our discussions and have a rich e-mail thread of on-going conversions. One of the processes by which material becomes data is selection and what count as data depends on theoretical assumptions about discourse and the broad topic of research (Wetherell et al., 2001).

Analysing the material from a discourse and a community of practice perspective provides insight into the positioning which occurred as we made sense of our learning. Cassell et al. (2009:530) highlight that becoming an accomplished qualitative researcher; '*requires us to have opportunities to reflect, be reflexive and experience being a qualitative researcher in order to learn and develop.*' They draw attention to the retrospective nature of this sense-making process.

Weick (1995) illustrates seven characteristics of sense making: 1) grounded in identity construction; 2) retrospective; 3) enactive of sensible environments; 4) social; 5) ongoing; 6) focused on and extracted by cues and 7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. He argues that sense-making enables individuals to: maintain a positive view of themselves (self-enhancement); see themselves as competent (efficacy); and see the life they are living as a coherent whole (consistency). Whenever an individual engages in any form of social interaction with others, they face a potential threat from these people in the form of an alternative, and competing, view. Individuals therefore need to continually reassert their identity as they move between social interactions (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, Patriotta and Brown, 2011). This highlights that individual personal identity is not fixed, but subject to change during social interactions. Cassell (2005) examines identity dynamics in the qualitative research interview and questions to what extent we are aware of identity work when in an interview situation. She suggests that it is difficult to make sense of identity work processes while we are located within them. It is therefore useful to create some temporal distance between a research intervention and our sense making of it.

Development of the paper since submitting to the conference

At the time of submitting the developmental paper we were still located within the research collaboration. We had planned a final meeting to help us make sense of our learning and to discuss what further action was required to maintain, or bring to a close, our research collaboration. We agreed that this meeting would benefit from the skills of an experienced action learning facilitator. Our facilitator contacted each of us to ensure we had a clear focus for the session. We agreed there were two key aspects for this 'sense- making' meeting and prior to the session our facilitator sent the following e-mail.

From my discussions with each of you there seems a clear focus for the session on 2 aspects:

1. looking back at what learning are you taking from this process of collaboratively researching? How do you see the collaboration? What have been the highlights and lowlights for you? What do you want to celebrate?
2. looking forward now the funded project has ended, how do you feel about continuing the collaboration; what would you like to achieve; what do you see needs to happen next?

By way of preparation could you do a couple of things - firstly read over your reflections you have kept over the months?

Secondly, prepare 2 creative pieces to bring with you that represent:

1. How I see this venture of collaborative research into critical reflection looking back.
2. My energy for continuing.

The representations could take any form you like e.g. picture, music clip, poem (your own or someone else's), artefact....

It would also be useful for your research purposes if this session could be audio recorded. Will you let me know if you give your consent for this?

The session lasted approximately 4 hours (with breaks) and at the time of writing this paper the analysis of the material has not been completed.

Plans to develop the paper prior to the conference

Prior to the conference the material will be analysed in order to contribute to the gap identified by Bell & Thorpe (2013); providing a reflective and reflexive account of a collaborative research process. The concept of communities of practice and a discourse perspective on learning and identity will inform this analysis. Therefore statements say something about norms of expression, ways of producing effects, in particular identity work and legitimacy. Reflective accounts will be interpreted in terms of what they accomplish rather than what they mirror – as action rather than in terms of true/false (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). The abstracted identities constructed from student accounts (Lawless et al. 2012) will provide a useful starting point for this analysis.

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