Knowledge creation in managed learning networks: structuring informal relations or killing the goose that laid the golden egg?

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Introduction

This paper explores the contribution to knowledge creation of managed learning networks among small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). The empirical focus is provided by a study currently being conducted into a series of learning networks in South East England that are being managed by the University of Brighton. These networks involve more than 450 firms divided into small groups that participate in regular meetings following a structured action learning methodology. The intention is to provide a supportive setting within which managers of SMEs can share knowledge, create ideas, and solve problems collectively through exchange between peers. These encounters follow a largely standardised pattern and are actively guided by an independent facilitator.

These networks offer an interesting example of an intermediate form of network relationship that has both formal and informal elements to it. Much of the literature on networks, knowledge, and innovation tends to focus either on more formal relationships, such as the wide variety of contractually formalised agreements governing relations between firms (e.g. Alter and Hage 1993; Powell, Koput et al. 1996), or on the role of informal social networks, such as those that develop in the context of professional or occupational communities (e.g. Van Maanen and Barley 1984; Dougherty 1992; Swan, Newell et al. 1999). There has been less interest in intermediate, semi-formal networks and this paper aims to go some way to address this absence.

This is particularly relevant because many managers and policy makers have acknowledged the importance of informal social networks for supporting knowledge creation and innovation, yet have sought to recreate their advantages through more formal and structured interventions. A typical example has been the widespread attempt by governments to establish regional clusters in an effort to capture the benefits of more organically emerging new industrial districts such as Silicon Valley or the Third Italy (Cooke 2001). Purposeful attempts by organisations to engineer communities of practice are another good example of trying to manage informal relations (Wenger, McDermott et al. 2002). Given the chequered history of some of these interventions, there is a non trivial question here about the extent to which informal network relations can be actively engineered. There are some who consider there to be a contradiction in attempting to formalise the informal (e.g. Roberts 2006).

Using case examples based on a multi-method approach entailing group observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentary analysis, the paper considers the potential for constructing and managing social networks for the purposes of learning between SMEs. Contrary to those who are critical of attempts at managed informality, the examples suggest that it is possible to achieve benefits through policy efforts to structure network relations providing they are not subject to excessive formalisation. The interactions between network members take place within a framework that provides them with a common reference point and permits the development of group norms that helps them to develop their capacity to learn from each other. This is grounded in a collaborative experiential model of learning rather than one based on the traditional pedagogic relationship between teacher and student (Lewin 1948; Revans 1980; Lave 1988).

The paper considers how far the notion of formality/informality offers a useful way of understanding the hybrid character of these learning networks. Central to our argument is the suggestion that formality/informality in social structures, practices, and relations operates along multiple dimensions. This is in contrast to the frequent tendency to think about the degree of network formality/informality as existing along a single scale. This is a legacy which has been left behind by transaction cost economics with its market/hierarchy dualism (Williamson 1975; 1985). Critical responses to this approach have tended to be framed in terms of exploring the middle ground between markets and hierarchies (e.g. Ouchi 1980; Powell 1991). This is an improvement, but they ultimately remain trapped within the same dualistic framework by thinking in terms of a single spectrum of organisational forms. By conceptualising formality/informality as a multi-dimensional construct, such dualistic thinking becomes difficult to sustain.

As a way of unfolding the concepts of formality/informality, the paper explores two interrelated sets of meanings. The first are related to the idea of formality/informality as a feature of rule-guided conduct. This is particularly relevant to the empirical illustration because the university-led programme of learning networks is effectively seeking to establish a structured set of rules, roles, and procedures to support collective learning activities. It is therefore important to understand what the formalisation of rule-guided behaviour entails and, especially, how far such explicit rules enable and constrain specific patterns of behaviour. The second set of meanings are around the notion of formality/informality as a feature of the social and emotional dynamics of groups. These refer more to the tone of social interactions and the extent to which trusting, open, and friendly relations develop among participants. Having introduced these different dimensions of formality/informality, key questions arise about the relationships between them – how does the degree of formalisation with respect to rule-guided conduct influence the socio-emotional dynamics of group relations, and vice versa; how far do rules defining particular activities act as a guide to conduct and are there variations in how they are interpreted and performed; and, crucially, what are the implications of different configurations of formality/informality along different dimensions for learning and other network outcomes?

Managed learning networks as an intermediate form

Much of the existing literature on learning in networks within and between organisations has focused either on more formal relationships between firms, such as joint ventures, strategic alliances, supplier networks, and consortia (e.g. Doz 1996; Dyer and Singh 1998; Powell 1998), or on more informal relations, such as social networks of entrepreneurs, occupational communities, communities of practice, regional clusters, and industrial districts (e.g. Van Maanen and Barley 1984; Russo 1985; Brown and Duguid 1991; Hansen 1995; Cooke 2001; Lindkvist 2005). There is a much smaller literature on inter-organisational networks specifically established for the purposes of learning and sharing knowledge (although see, Tell 2000). We focus specifically on this neglected middle ground in the network literature. We also depart from the majority of existing work on networks in that we are not so much concerned with the structure of network relations, as in considering the detailed practices through which managers participate in learning with networks of others. The focus, therefore, is very much on a practice-orientated, dynamic, and process-based view of social networks. This is consistent with what (Kanter and Eccles 1992: 527) identified as the need "to add a more active, process view of networks to the structural view that currently predominates." More than fifteen years have passed since they made this comment, and yet if anything the literature on networks has pushed further ahead in developing complex

structural models which potentially become more and more removed from the domain of recognisable practice.

As a starting point for thinking about networks in the middle ground between formality and informality, Bessant and Tsekouras (2001) have distinguished between networks that learn and learning networks. The former are not primarily formed for the purpose of learning, and may not even be purposefully formed at all, and yet involve sets of relationships through which learning may take place among participants in the network through engaging in whatever activities links them together. Learning networks, in contrast, are specifically established, or engaged with, for the express purpose of encouraging learning. The typology of learning networks proposed by Bessant and Tsekouras (2001) included a range of types, as follows: professional institutions; sector-based associations; topic based groups, such as 'best practice' clubs; region-based formations, such as clusters and local learning cooperatives; supplier-based networks; government promoted networks; and task-support or practitioner networks. Some of these are more formalised – for example, professional institutions or sector-based associations which have explicit charters, terms of reference, and conditions of membership. Others are more informal or emergent in nature, such as practitioner networks in which there is no clear central organisation steering the network.

Acknowledging the different degrees of formality of learning networks raises questions about the implications of these differences for the nature and quality of learning processes. Some commentators, for example, have argued that learning is such a fragile, culturally specific, and socially embedded process, that any attempt to formalise and purposefully recreate these conditions is likely to encounter set-backs. A good illustration of this is the way that the concept of communities of practice has developed over time. Initially referring to culturally and historically situated practices through which learning takes place in communities, where learning is an accomplishment progressively developed through ongoing participation, the idea of communities of practice has for some become just another management tool that can be purposefully engineered. Much like debates surrounding organisational culture (e.g. Schein 1985), there is the concern that externally imposed, top-down initiatives to set up communities of practice are not able to replicate the complex and emergent social dynamics involved and may actually work against them (e.g.Roberts 2006).

Thompson (2005) has made a useful distinction between *controlling structures* and *seeding structures*. The former, which involve direct attempts to control the formation and activities of communities of practice are shown to be likely to have a detrimental effect, being perceived as enforced and resulting in resistance through, for example, passive non-participation. By contrast, "s*eeding structures* – those that make no attempt to directly control people's actions, but merely seek to influence *future* interactions – can be productive and may even be necessary in generating some organizational context and a shared problematic for potential community participants to coalesce." (Thompson 2005: 163, emphasis in original). As we shall see below, the logic of the learning networks on which the empirical illustration focuses is orientated more towards a seeding approach in that they attempt to create environments within which particular sets of social relations are likely to develop without over-specifying the content of those relations.

The recognition that different learning networks display varying degrees of formality also potentially introduces some interesting incongruities. For example, the attribution of some measure of purpose or planning to learning networks immediately lends them a more formalised character compared with networks that learn, in which learning is secondary, often

unplanned, and sometimes incidental. Paradoxically, this means that relatively informal learning may be taking place within the formalised institutional setting of a hierarchical organisation, joint venture, or strategic alliance; or alternatively, more purposeful, formal learning may be occurring among loosely and informally organised networks of professionals. It should be obvious that the construct of formality/informality is in danger of being stretched too far without careful consideration of the different aspects of social action and interaction to which it refers. To this end, the next section considers one possible way of thinking about the multi-dimensional character of formality/informality.

Formality and informality in networks: what does it mean?

While the literature on organisational networks seems to identify a variety of configurations whose combined attributes place them more towards the formal or informal end of the spectrum, it is important to recognise that reducing the notion of formality/informality to a single dimension is a huge simplification. For example, even the most formalised and contractual of inter-firm agreements may be accompanied at the inter-personal level by informal social relations between the representatives of the different parties. Similarly, ostensibly informal networking forums, such as Chambers of Commerce meetings or supplier clubs, may entail relations between participants that involve rigid, if implicit, codes of conduct that are enforced through subtle, if effective, collective sanctions. This raises questions about the particular features of networks and their relations to which the description of formal/informal is being applied. Recognising that the idea of formality/informality relating to learning networks is likely to be a multi-dimensional concept, this section attempts to unpack some of the ways that it can be used. In particular, given their relevance to the empirical material presented below, we focus on two key dimensions of formality/informality and consider how these might be interrelated. The first relates to formality as characterised by rule-guided conduct, particularly where the rules, procedures, or processes are explicitly defined and sometimes codified. The archetype of this kind of formalisation is the mechanistic bureaucracy, where roles, responsibilities, reporting lines, and activities are tightly defined and monitored. The second refers to formality/informality more as a characteristic of social interaction. More formal social relations are those characterised by distance between participants, with associated behaviours such as deference, reservation, solemnity, and so forth. More informal relations are those where participants relate to each other in a more friendly, open, and inclusive fashion. To an extent, this is a corollary of the idea of formalisation being a feature of rule-guided conduct – the close following of rules is often associated with formality in inter-personal behaviour, although strongly rule-bound settings can become the focus for subversive and escapist behaviours that limit the reach of formalisation. However, any overlap between formality as rule-guided conduct and formality in terms of the emotional tone of social interaction can only ever be incomplete. Being perhaps closer to the commonsense notion of formality/informality, the socio-emotional meaning attached to it is more self-evident (although actually explaining the dynamics of it is a different matter). The idea of formality/informality as related to social rules, however, requires a bit more explanation. This is particularly so because there is always some slippage between social rules in the abstract and their performance in practice. To use a distinction introduced by Latour (1986), originally in relation to his conception of power, there is a difference between the ostensive and performative dimensions of social rules. This difference opens up the possibility for divergence, even if only minimal, between abstract rules and their concrete enactment.

This possibility arises because of two inherent features of social rules. The first is the understanding that rules are rarely, if ever, comprehensive and able to cover every situation and every eventuality. They are always liable to be misunderstood or misapplied and it would be excessively burdensome, if not impossible, to supply the necessary information to prevent such misunderstandings (as a number of the 'breaching' experiments conducted by Garfinkel (1967) clearly demonstrated). Taking inspiration from Wittgenstein, Taylor (1993) has suggested that rules can never contain the principles of their own application. If rules are purely about formal internal representations of what should be done, as the information processing model suggests, then the only way that errors of application can be corrected is through the provision of further rules, which could potentially lead to an infinite regress of rules about rules about rules *ad infinitum*. However, Taylor has argued that rule following is only possible against an unarticulated background of understanding, or 'form of life' to use Wittgenstein's (1953) terminology, comprising an embodied, practical mastery acquired in the form of habits, dispositions, tendencies, and so on. Crucially, the incompleteness of rules and their achievement against a background of practical know-how mean that there is always scope for improvisation within rule-guided action. The creativity at the core of rule following behaviour is also highlighted by the 'et cetera principle' in ethnomethodology which suggests that communication is usually based on a mutual assumption of incompleteness (Garfinkel 1967).

The second feature of rules is that they are situated accomplishments that are necessarily tied to specific circumstances. As a result, there is the ever-present potential for change, of a greater or lesser extent and regardless of whether or not it is actualised, because there is always an active role for people in their enactment of rules. As Sewell (1992: 20) has argued, "[t]o be an agent means to be capable of exerting some control over the social relations in which one is enmeshed, which in turn implies the ability to transform those social relations to some degree". There have been a number of attempts to represent the distinction between rules as abstract guides for what should be done and rules as concrete enactments. Mouzelis (1995), for example, has distinguished between the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic in relation to social rules. The paradigmatic refers to general rules which can be applied in a variety of circumstances, whereas the syntagmatic concerns actual instances of social interaction which give expression to these rules and independent of which they have no existence. The paradigmatic is associated with the postion-role and dispositional dimensions of social action, while the syntagmatic corresponds with the interactive-situational dimension identified by Mouzelis. The position-role dimension relates to normative expectations surrounding particular roles, the dispositional dimension concerns historically acquired schemes of perception, thought, and action, and the interactive-situational dimension refers to the open-ended and contingent enactment of these dimensions through concrete practices of social action and interaction. According to Tsoukas (1996: 19, emphasis in original), these three dimensions come together in the following way: "human agents *select out* on the one hand what they understand to be the *relevant* aspects of both their role-related normative expectations and their sets of dispositions, and on the other those *relevant* aspects of the local conditions within which their actions take place, and try to fit the two together".

Acknowledging the incompleteness and situated character of social rules has some interesting implications for understanding processes of formalisation/informalisation. No matter how formalised a particular set of rules may be, there is always some scope for variations and improvisations which, in a sense, introduces an informal element to rule-guided conduct. This introduces a potential tension between formal structures, the implicit background of understanding through which rules and the situations of their application are interpreted, and

their performance in practice. To complicate matters further, it is important to recognise that not all rules are formalised. A good deal of social conduct is guided by shared rules and expectations that are rarely made explicit and in many cases drawn upon unconsciously. However, while such rules may be informal, in the sense that they are not outwardly specified, the conduct that is guided by them may nevertheless take on a deeply patterned, formalised character. This means that rules themselves are subject to varying levels of formality, from more explicit, codified rules relating to particular domains of action at one extreme, to implicit socially shared frames and expectations at the other. Nevertheless, both formal and informal rules depend upon being performed to give them concrete expression. This is particularly the case for informal rules that in important respects can not be said to exist independently of their performance in practice (Giddens 1984). As a result, the performance of rules may also be subject to differing degrees of formality. Introducing a multi-dimensional understanding of formality/informality allows us to consider how these different dimensions are interrelated and some of the paradoxes that can arise. As we shall see in the next section, there are two sets of relationships that are particularly relevant to the empirical illustration – the first is the relationship between formally specified rules and the extent to which these are able to influence informal norms and rules of conduct; and the second concerns how the rule-based understanding of formality/informality interacts with the social/emotional meaning of the construct.

Structuring informality: the ProfitNet experience

The context for the following illustration is provided by a series of learning networks in South East England initiated and managed by the University of Brighton under a programme called ProfitNet. Based on the findings of an earlier action research project undertaken in Hastings in 2004, the ProfitNet programme was extended in October 2006 to cover the whole of East and West Sussex. The programme was designed to provide a structured platform for the managers of small- and medium-sized enterprises to learn from each other's experiences in what have been called 'industry peer networks' (Sgourev and Zuckerman 2006). So far more than 450 managers have been involved in the programme, participating in monthly meetings with groups of around 15 practitioners primarily organised along sectoral lines (e.g. manufacturing, creative industries, construction, hospitality and tourism, professional services, social enterprises) with a few groups established specifically for recently formed start-up businesses.

The following examples are based on a small sub-set of what has been a much larger research project looking at different aspects of the ProfitNet programme. This part of the research has focused on the dynamics of the groups in action and involved the direct observation of a selection of the groups over a six month period.[§] 11 groups (or around one third of the total) were chosen for observation using sector, region, and indicators of member engagement (e.g. attendance levels, reports from facilitators and the programme managers) as selection criteria (see Table 1). Observation of the selected groups was divided between two researchers, including one of the authors, and involved attendance at their monthly meetings. Overall a total of more than 140 hours of meetings have been observed. The discussion at these meetings was subject to audio recording while the researchers took notes on the interactions between the group, paying particular attention to the structure of interactions, the use of artefacts or technologies to support group activities (such as data projectors, flip charts, notebooks, etc.), and any non-verbal or sidebar communication. Other sources of data

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[§] The names of the groups and individual group members have been disguised to preserve anonymity.

relevant to this part of the study included semi-structured and informal interviews with programme managers, facilitators, and group members, and the various forms and records that are kept by the operational team, such as meeting minutes, facilitators' reports, and programme managers' reports.

Group no.	Region	Sector	Engagement
1	A	Creative Industries	High
2	A	Mixed/Start-Ups	Medium
3	B	Professional Service	High
4	B	Construction	Low
5	C	Mixed	Low
6	C	Creative Industries	Low
7	C	Mixed/Start-Ups	High
8	B	Social Enterprises	Low
9	D	Social Enterprises	Medium
10	D	Engineering	Low
11	D	Mixed/Start-Ups	High

Table 1: Selection characteristics of groups for observation

Developing rules and norms of learning and participation

In establishing ProfitNet, the intention was to create a more structured platform for managers to learn together without making it so rigid as to stifle the creative potential of group interactions by over-specifying the content of activities to be undertaken. The idea was to provide an enabling framework which could promote a collective cycle of reflection in which problems are defined, potential solutions are generated, actions selected and implemented, and the outcomes of these actions reviewed and evaluated. Each of the elements of this cycle are loosely structured internally, in the sense that they establish a relatively open space within which the group is able to follow any number of directions in their discussions. However, the sequence and broad agenda for each of the activities is standardised to the extent that the meetings for each of the groups is designed to follow the same general pattern.

This is divided into five main activities: (1) Business planning – where each month one of the group members presents a summary of their business activities, describes the opportunities and challenges faced by the company, and outlines their business plan. This forms the basis for a discussion among the group through which problems are defined and possible solutions suggested. (2) Feedback on business planning – in this segment of the meeting managers who have previously presented their business plans are asked to report back on their progress with implementing actions identified from the discussion. (3) Action learning – this part of the meeting is open for any of the participants to raise issues that they would like help on and invite suggestions about possible courses of action. (4) Feedback on action learning – where group members recount any actions they have taken as a result of suggestions from previous meetings. (5) Business development workshops – each month there is a workshop run by a specialist from outside the group on specific topics, such as finance, marketing, human resource management, e-commerce, etc. Each of the groups is facilitated by an independent professional facilitator, sometimes with the help of an assistant. Their role was defined by the designers and managers of the programme to be one of ensuring that the general structure of activities described above was followed and of guiding

the group members through the process of reflection without exerting unnecessary influence on the issues discussed.

The partial structuring of group activities was intended to introduce a degree of predictability to the order of group interactions without overly constraining the issues that could be discussed. The aim was to establish an element of discipline in the way that the groups learned, recognising in particular that the translation of group discussions into actions on the part of members would benefit from support and monitoring without which the cycle of reflection would be incomplete. However, it is important to recognise that establishing formal rules, procedures, and roles for the groups is necessarily incomplete in that their performance in practice is typically varied, and equally, that these mechanisms are not the only way that group behaviour can be formalised. In terms of the prescribed structure of the meetings, for example, there was some variation in how the pattern of activities was interpreted and performed by participants. The group facilitators, not surprisingly, have a significant influence on how the meetings unfold, reflecting their different styles, levels of experience, and expertise (see Table 2). In Group 11, for instance, the facilitator tended to get deeply involved in the discussions of the group and, as a result, would lose track of the progress of the meeting. Different parts of the meeting, particularly the business planning

Group no.	Facilitation style
1	Low key but very receptive to group interactions, summarises key themes rather than offering own opinions, likes to stick closely to the meeting agenda
2	Enthusiastic, somewhat passive, regularly offers opinions, empathises with group members as sharing the same problems
3	Somewhat cool, but professional and competent, very receptive to group interactions, encourages all to contribute, regularly summarises key themes, likes to stick closely to the meeting agenda
4	Enthusiastic but inexperienced, identifies closely with the group and its interests, timing and recording actions often an issue, regularly offers opinions and information
5	Regularly offers opinions, participates as a member of the group when making decisions, empathises with members' problems, encourages participation, some tension with dominant member of the group
6	Facilitator changed mid-way through observation period – F1 quiet and relatively passive, receptive to group interactions, good rapport, encourages reflection; F2 rather laissez-faire, enthusiastic, regularly offers own opinions.
7	Slightly cool but competent approach, attempts to include everybody
8	Enthusiastic, receptive to group interactions, allows discussion to flow, although this can lead to time-keeping issues
9	Low key but very receptive to group interactions, summarises key themes rather than offering own opinions
10	Low key but very receptive to group interactions, summarises key themes rather than offering own opinions, nevertheless struggles to encourage enthusiastic participation
11	Energetic, inclusive, encourages people to reflect on what has been said, frequently offers opinions on problems, gets closely involved in group discussions, time-keeping is often an issue

Table 2: Style of group facilitation

session, would overrun their allotted time and there would be less time for the other activities. In Group 4, the facilitator was relatively inexperienced and found it difficult to intervene in the activities of the group. This also resulted in mismatches in the time allocated to the specified activities, actions from the discussions would not be recorded, and, partly related to this, there was a rather haphazard approach to following up actions from the previous meetings. In other groups, by contrast, there was a much closer adherence to the meeting agenda, sometimes verging on the inflexible (e.g. Group 1 and Group 3).

In terms of the theoretical vocabulary outlined earlier, the interplay between ostensive and performative dimensions of the groups' rules, procedures, and roles is variable depending on how they are enacted over time. Due to this there is also a sense in which the formalisation of group behaviour does not reside in the rules, procedures, and formal roles themselves, but in how they are performed in practice. This introduces an important set of implications. For example, although all of the groups share the same standardised collection of mechanisms intended to structure their activities, this does not mean that they all display the same level of formalisation in terms of rule-following behaviour. In some instances, as in Groups 4 and 11, what is happening through their unfolding practices is what might be called an informalisation of the formal, i.e. the formal rules do not have the structuring effect for which they were designed. Conversely, it is also possible for the informal aspects of group relations, in terms of implicit social norms, expectations, values, and beliefs, to have a structuring influence on patterns of group behaviour. Indeed, as suggested above, a large proportion of social actions and interactions are relatively patterned and routinised. In this way, there may also be a formalisation of the informal, i.e. the implicit or formal norms that help to constitute social practices, may have a structuring effect on group interactions that lends them a formal character even though it has not been codified or made explicit.

Following on from this, there is the potential for some interesting intersections between formal rules of engagement and informal norms of conduct. This was clearly recognised by the architects of the ProfitNet programme through the ambition that by establishing a structured framework for group learning it would ultimately have an influence on group norms. In other words, the formal rules and procedures that were prescribed at the outset would, it was anticipated, become progressively internalised and routine for the members of the groups. By following the same familiar cycle of reflection, the idea was that the capacity of group members to develop norms and routines of reflective learning corresponding to this pattern would be encouraged over time through repeated participation. Equally, there was a clear recognition that the willingness of group members to participate in collective learning with other people who, in most cases, they have not previously met would require the gradual development of greater familiarity and trust, in line with classic theories of group development (e.g. Bennis and Shepard 1956; Tuckman 1965; Tuckman and Jensen 1977). However, there were also attempts to accelerate this process by explicitly raising issues about expectations and norms of conduct in the opening meetings of the group. Developed jointly by the members themselves, the resulting values and expected behaviours were underwritten by a signed agreement covering such issues as confidentiality, openness, support, respect for others' ideas, and so on. Needless to say, the formally prescribed framework for conducting the meetings and the written agreements covering expected norms could only ever provide an incomplete and abstract ideal which relied on being enacted to be given concrete form. Again, to use the framework mentioned above, these are the ostensive dimensions of group norms, while their enactment through actual group interactions can be termed the performative dimension. The relationship between the two is not deterministic; to a greater

or lesser extent there is always scope for variation, purposeful or otherwise, in how norms are performed in practice.

Finding evidence for the development of group norms is notoriously difficult. However, both an analysis of patterns in the observational data and reports from the members themselves suggest a movement from more closed to more open interactions. A useful indication of this can be found in the evolving behaviour of members, particularly those who in earlier meetings were quite reticent to participate and would make few, if any, contributions to the discussion. In several cases, these quieter individuals started to become more involved in group discussions after several months of coming to the meetings. Another pattern in the level of participation was related to the making of business planning presentations. Many members were extremely anxious about presenting their business plans, being fearful about revealing problems with their business or coming across as not entirely competent or successful. As reported by other studies, group reflection involves an element of vulnerability as individuals are called upon to subject their individual ideas to public scrutiny, which can make the experience extremely uncomfortable (e.g. Platzer, Blake et al. 2000). Several of these individuals needed coaching and encouragement from the group facilitator before making their presentations. However, for most, having presented their business plans to the rest of the group and finding the response to be generally positive, there was a subsequent increase in their participation in the meetings that followed. For those who started off being wary about contributing, it seemed that overcoming the hurdle of making their business presentation was something of a milestone after which they felt more confident about taking part. For some, however, the collective pressure on publicly reflecting about their practice was too much, leading to avoidance behaviours, such as delaying the scheduled date of their presentation as far as possible, sending last minute apologies for not being able to make the meeting at which they were due to present, or, in a few instances, leaving the group altogether. One implication of this is that the development of group norms is double-edged – collective expectations about being open in sharing experiences that for some are experienced as positively beneficial, can for others be felt as the tyranny of the group. Even relatively confident members reported that the process of becoming comfortable in sharing information with the group did not happen instantly. As one of the members in Group 2 recounted:

> I think everyone's been quite open … And as we've got to know each other more I think more bits have come out … Because I work alone from home it's just having that support; knowing there's a group of like-minded people who are going through the same challenges. And feeling that once a month you can come along and you've got that support. You've got people, even if they're quite silly basic things, it's ok to tell them. Whereas you know you probably wouldn't say a lot of the things we say here to anyone else because you don't want to look weak or you don't … you can't show that you don't know everything. You're the face of your company and you've always got to appear that you really know what you're doing. You don't always, you have to act sometimes. But coming here you can let your guard down a bit and be yourself. (Claire, Group 2, May 2008).

One interesting question concerns the extent to which such norms are localised and group-specific or capable of being shared more broadly across different practice settings. The following example offers some indication not only that most of the groups had developed a norm of open reflection internally, but also that it was beginning to influence their wider activities. In addition to the monthly group meetings, the ProfitNet programme also offered a

number of opportunities for members from different groups to meet each other. One such opportunity was a series of workshops designed to help participants improve the absorptive capacity of their organisations (Cohen and Levinthal 1990). At one of these workshops, the facilitator was delayed in arriving. While they were waiting, the assembled members, who had come from different groups, rearranged the tables and chairs in the room, sat down in small groups, and began to talk about their businesses and the problems they faced. They did this with minimal discussion and without hesitation. By the time the facilitator arrived, the members were deep in conversation, offering each other advice and assistance, to the extent that he was initially loathe to interrupt. Although anecdotal, this example suggests that the workshop participants shared a common frame and experience of relating that guided their interactions within this different setting.

Task-focus and group maintenance as dimensions of formality/informality

Further insights into the varying processes of formalisation and informalisation within the groups, and their relationship to rule-guided and norm-based behaviour, can be gained by examining more closely the different configurations of practice that they displayed. For this purpose, the observational data from the group meetings are being analysed using a coding scheme modified from the well-established categories of group behaviour proposed by Bales (1950). The conceptual underpinning to this framework suggests that most groups tend to engage in a mixture of task-focused and group maintenance activities and that the relative balance between these different types of behaviour has implications for how the group performs and develops over time. Task-focused behaviours are those which relate to the jointly agreed purpose of the group – in the current context this means those activities concerned with learning and sharing experiences between the group members. Group maintenance behaviours are those which contribute to the continued existence of the group as a cohesive unit by supporting the social and emotional needs of the members. Although there is by no means a complete correspondence, there tends to be some overlap between task-focus and formality and group maintenance and informality. However, consistent with the earlier emphasis on the multi-dimensional nature of the constructs of formality and informality, it is important to recognise that the relationship between these tendencies is neither unilinear nor symmetrical. Bearing in mind that the process of analysing the data is still ongoing, Figure 1 offers a preliminary mapping of where the groups are located in terms of their relative emphasis on task and maintenance behaviours.

The majority of the groups are located along the diagonal where maintenance and task-focused activities are broadly in balance, albeit at different overall levels of intensity, while some groups exhibit an altogether more one-sided set of behaviours. By taking some of the more outlying cases, the following examples offer some initial indications of the implications of different mixtures of group behaviours for their learning and other outcomes.

Group 11 (high maintenance/low task)

This group is comprised of the managers of start-up businesses. Group meetings are highly animated with a considerable amount of joking and laughter. There is a strong emphasis on supporting behaviours and members frequently provide each other encouragement for what they are doing. There is a well developed sense of care among the group. In terms of their focus on the task of collective learning, however, the group exhibited a relatively lower level compared to other groups. Group meetings would involve an intense exchange of ideas and
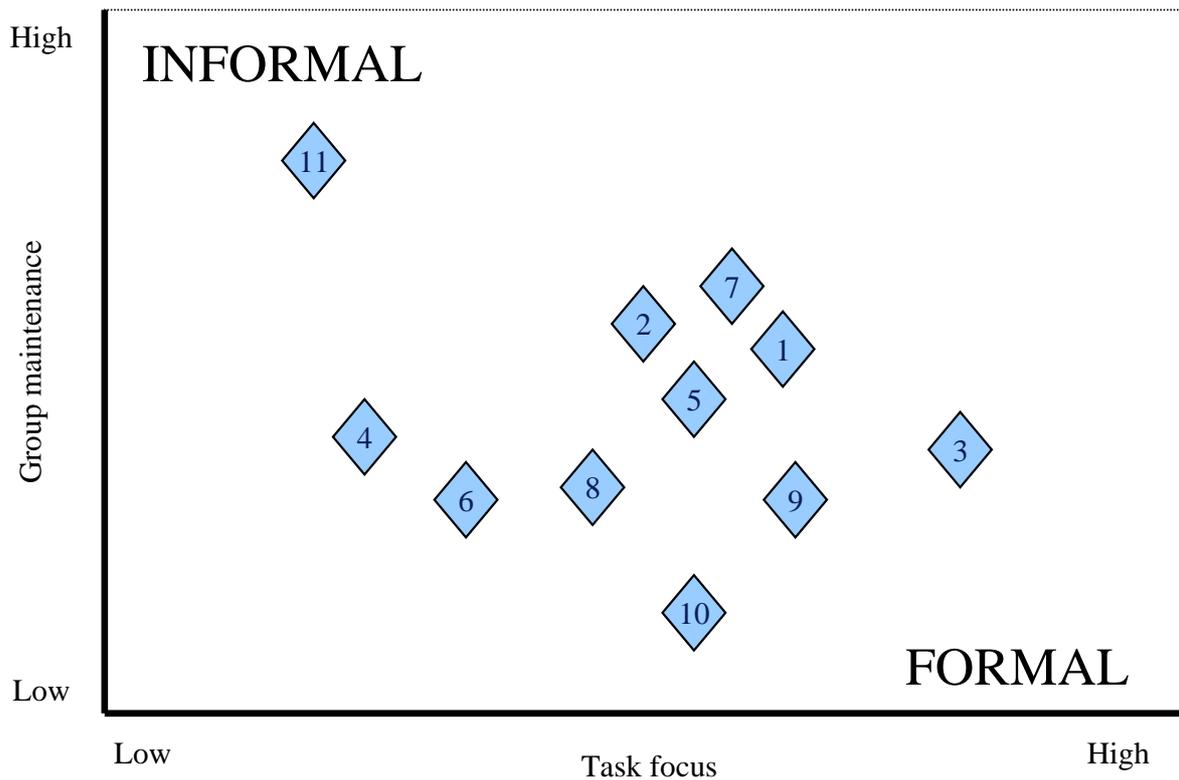
Figure 1: Task-focus and group maintenance behaviours in the observed groups

opinions, but because they did not follow the same degree of structure as other groups, there was inconsistency in how far members were encouraged to select, prioritise, and report back on actions from their discussions. Overall, the group appeared to provide more of a support network than a forum for reflective learning. As an example, one of the members, Nicola, who has recently joined the group, is experiencing major problems with her business. She believes that she has a workable proposition, but she is taking on more debt and is not sure how long she will be able to sustain her position. She is considering whether she should continue what she is doing or seek alternatives such as dissolving the business and looking for a job. Even though she is new to the group, the other members empathise closely with Nicola and together try to find ways to resolve her dilemma. The following is an extract from their discussion:

Nicola: I'm so far in debt now that I could probably work for the next ten years trying to pay off my debts.

Susan: Then get out.

Nicola: If I get out there's no way that I'm ever going to get out of debt […]

Facilitator 2: I'd say you're fairly dynamic, very charismatic, you've put a lot of effort into it, and if it hasn't really pulled off, I can't see the line working completely and I think perhaps the answer would be 'I'll go and look for some work'.

Nicola: That's what I'm facing.

Facilitator 1: No you're not. No, no, no.

Fiona: You've learned all these business and management skills. You take that forward and use it.

Chris: I think you've got a lot to offer.

Facilitator 1:   Why don't we suggest that next month if you would like to come and present to us, we'll help you to build where your strengths are, where your direction could be, be it in a job or in your own business, to give you something to recognise what you have developed in yourself.

Susan: Maybe we could write your CV.

Facilitator 1:   Yeah. Do something that constructively helps you to take what you've achieved in the business. You haven't failed in the business. The marketplace isn't the right marketplace. That's not the same thing. And you mustn't go away feeling that you have failed.

Following this exchange, Nicola appears somewhat heartened, although still very depressed. After the meeting, the facilitators take her for a cup of coffee to discuss her problem. At the next meeting of the group, when Nicola is asked to update everybody on her situation, she reveals that another member of the group telephoned her to find out how she was doing. They ended up having a long conversation, the outcome of which was that Nicola has decided to keep pursuing her business venture. There is, of course, an element of collective learning occurring here – the group has offered various opinions about possible course of action open to Nicola, this has helped her to decide what to do, and she has come back to the group to reflect on this decision. However, the more evident feature of the above exchange and subsequent events, aside from Susan's rather curt comment, is one of strong peer support. If anything, the element of support and encouragement, particularly her contact with the other member after the meeting, gives Nicola the determination and confidence to continue what she is doing, even if this is perhaps not the overall message that came out of the meeting. Although there was some disagreement, the overall consensus of the group was that Nicola would probably be better off cutting her losses. This is not to say that social support and solidarity are not worthwhile elements of group participation, but simply to acknowledge that the social-emotional and task features of group life may not always be consistent and mutually reinforcing.

Group 4 (medium maintenance/low task)

The members of this group are all drawn from different parts of the construction industry. Group meetings are relatively reserved in terms of the tone of interactions between members, although there is nevertheless a certain amount of friendliness and support within the group. Compared with Group 11, the intensity of interaction is considerably lower, lending a much slower pace to the meetings. At the same time, the prescribed structure and timing of the meetings was not consistently adhered to, mainly because of how the lead facilitator carried out his role – although this did improve over time. In the earlier meetings, the business planning section would take up a significant portion of the overall time. More specifically, the business planning presentations that individual members would present each month would often overrun and there would be less time for discussion. This, in turn, would have a knock-on effect on the other activities that were supposed to happen during the meetings. In particular, the time available for the group as a whole to engage in action learning would be

limited. This is reflected in the number of actions recorded from the business planning and action learning segments of the meetings, as well as in the extent to which these are followed up. Table 3 provides data on these activities drawn from the minutes recorded from the meeting.

Meeting no.	Business Planning			Action Learning	
	Feedback comments	Actions committed to	Actions followed	Members raising issues	Members acting on feedback
1	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	0
2	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	0
3	N/A	N/A	N/A	0	0
4	0	0	0	1	0
5	11	3	0	1	0
6	2	0	0	0	0
7	5	1	1	1	0
8	9	4	0	0	0
9	13	13	5	1	0
10	15	0	N/A	0	N/A
Total	55	21	6	9	0
Average/meeting	7.9	3	0.9	0.9	0

Table 3: Group 4 – learning actions and feedback

As regards the business planning part of the meetings, there is evidence of some discussion around business plans, but these are not consistently translated into actions that are explicitly followed up. The data on the action learning section of the meetings suggest an even lower level of engagement, with few issues being raised and no actions being recorded at all. It is worth noting that this is not necessarily an accurate reflection of the situation within this group. Keeping accurate minutes is one of the responsibilities of the facilitator and there is some uncertainty around how far this happened in this case. This is consistent with the tendency for this group to diverge from the formal procedures. However, although the direct observations of the group indicate a somewhat greater volume of action learning issues discussed, the general picture does not depart greatly from that presented by the data from the meeting minutes.

Group 3 (medium maintenance/high task)

This group is made up of consultants and managers of professional service organisations. Again the interactions between members are characterised by a certain degree of reservation alongside more friendly and supportive exchanges and behaviours. The intensity of interactions between members during the meetings is comparable to Group 11 and much higher than Group 4. The meetings follow the prescribed pattern and the two facilitators keep a close eye on the pace and progression of activities. All members are keen to contribute to the discussion and the facilitators are careful to ensure that as many people as possible get an opportunity to speak. Table 4 provides data on the actions generated and followed through from the meetings.

Meeting no.	Business Planning			Action Learning	
	Feedback comments	Actions committed to	Actions followed	Members raising issues	Members acting on feedback
1	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	N/A
2	17	2	1	2	1
3	11	0	0	4	2
4	15	0	0	2	2
5	4	2	0	2	1
6	23	3	1	0	0
7	19	2	0	2	0
8	19	2	0	2	0
9	18	3	0	2	1
10	29	3	0	1	0
11	22	3	1	2	2
12	15	2	N/A	1	N/A
13	N/A	N/A	N/A	1	N/A
Total	192	22	3	23	9
Average/meeting	17.5	2.0	0.3	1.8	0.9

Table 4: Group 3 – learning actions and feedback

In comparison with Group 4, what is immediately noticeable is the greater amount of feedback received from the business planning sessions. However, there appears to be a similar problem with a lack of translation between issues discussed and actions carried out. The pattern for the action learning sessions of the meeting is improved, with roughly 50% of members acting on feedback compared with none in Group 4. Even though the facilitators are much more focused on following the official procedures in this case, it is again likely that the difficulties of accurately capturing this kind of information mean that the amount of actions generated and followed through is probably under-represented. From the observational data, one big difference with Group 4 is that there is a more consistently undertaken process of asking members to report back on actions they have committed to in both the business planning and action learning sessions. Even though this may only involve members reporting that they have not actually taken any actions, the process itself does at least signal that there are potential actions that have yet to be carried through, which may result in their subsequent implementation. This is arguably less likely in Group 4 where issues are dropped entirely off the agenda and the motivational potential of having to report back to the group is therefore absent.

Group 10 (low maintenance/medium task)

This group is composed of managers from engineering-based manufacturing companies. The discussions within the group are fairly muted and the number and pace of interactions is quite low. Displays of support between members are not entirely missing, but compared to the other groups they are much less evident. Exchanges between members can be somewhat critical in nature and the recipients of advice frequently emphasise the limitations they face and why they would be unable to take the proposed actions. This lends the meetings a fairly negative tone. The facilitation of the meetings is extremely competent, but nevertheless the prescribed pattern of activities is not always upheld. One reason for this is the difficulty of

engaging the members – with less discussion around business plans and action learning, the conversation would sometimes founder and turn to more general topics rather than following the agenda. This was despite the best efforts of the facilitator to generate enthusiasm and keep things on track. The general lack of enthusiasm and engagement can be seen in the active membership of the group. While the earlier meetings were regularly attended by 12-13 of the total membership of 15, the attendance levels at the later meetings were typically between 4 and 6. People would often turn up late for the meetings and it was not unusual for them to start half an hour later than scheduled. Since the group appeared to offer neither the benefits of participating in a friendly and supportive social network, nor those of structured reflective learning and experience-sharing, the commitment of members diminished. Once started, this seemed to set in motion a downward spiral whereby the fewer people who turned up to meetings, the less chance there was of sustaining any extensive exchange of ideas. This came to a head in the penultimate meeting of the programme. At this meeting, the member who was due to present his business plan saw that only four other people had turned up to the meeting and decided that it was not worthwhile proceeding. The meeting was cut short, but only after two hours of negative discussion between those in attendance. This started out being directed at criticising the programme, and expanded to cover the state of the economy, problems with the public sector, the cost of fuel, and competition from China. The following exchange is fairly indicative of the tone of the meeting:

David: I think we're quite an expensive commodity to waste an afternoon. I think it's …

Rachel: We've all got lots of work to do.

David: I feel as if I might as well turn round and go back again and get some work in this afternoon.

Neil: I'll add my voice to that because actually I wasn't going to say anything now. I decided I was going to send [the project manager] an email because I'm not chuffed actually. There's an awful lot going on in the office and … I find this afternoon difficult to justify […]

David: It's interesting that even this whatever it is I'm supposed to be doing this afternoon, there's only four of you. I don't mean that you're not good, but it's the sort of thing that … it started off there were sort of like twelve people …

Discussion

The ProfitNet programme is based on a model of reflective peer-based learning which attempts to achieve a balance between creating a standardised structure within which collective learning can take place and encouraging a sufficiently open, trusting, friendly, and creative environment where participants feel able to share their experiences. If one takes a unidimensional perspective on formality/informality, there is a potential tension here between the formalising influence of the programme's structuring elements (rules, procedures, processes, and roles) and the need to develop group relations involving a level of informality likely to promote knowledge sharing. However, as we have seen there are multiple ways that the constructs of formality and informality can be interpreted. In particular, we have highlighted the distinction between formality as a characteristic of rule-following and as a feature of the social and emotional relations of groups. There may be an association between

the two meanings, but this is certainly not a necessary relationship. That is to say, it is not unsurprising for a close following of rules and procedures to be accompanied by formality in terms of the socio-emotional tone of the group. This is broadly the picture offered by Group 3. Nevertheless, as suggested by Group 4, formality in socio-emotional behaviours does not always have to be associated with rule-following. Equally, although Group 11 suggests the kind of relationship between informality in socio-emotional dynamics and an absence of rule-driven behaviour that might be expected, this is not an invariable relationship. While the pen portraits of the outlying cases offer some more detailed insights into how the interplay between task-focus and socio-emotional behaviours might unfold in practice, it is important to note that the majority of cases fall closer to the middle ground where there is a more balanced mixture between carrying out the task and keeping the group together. This suggests that the programme has been relatively effective in promoting groups that are able to mix the two types of behaviour.

As regards the implications for learning and other outcomes from the group interactions, it should be evident from the case examples that there is no clear-cut relationship between formality/informality in group behaviour and the volume or type of learning emerging from their interactions. Unfortunately, the data on learning outcomes captured from meeting minutes is currently incomplete (as well as somewhat unreliable). For the two case examples where such data are available (Groups 3 and 4), the general picture is one of a failure to translate collective discussions into individual actions by the members. Given that the socio-emotional character of each of these groups was fairly similar, this appears to be regardless of the extent to which the groups engaged in structured learning, which was higher for Group 3 and lower for Group 4. One might expect that, other things being equal, a more structured approach to learning should encourage a more consistent following-through of actions. The data, limited as they are, do not support such a claim. Further work is needed in extracting data on actions from meeting minutes for all of the groups and cross-checking the accuracy of the data against meeting observations where they are available. It is also important to note the limitations of numerical data as an indicator of group learning. The volume of actions generated and implemented from group discussions says nothing about the quality, impact, or effectiveness of those actions. This is where a more qualitative analysis of group learning outcomes will be essential.

As far as other influences of the interplay between formality and informality in task and group maintenance behaviours is concerned, there are two conclusions to be drawn. Firstly, as suggested by the example of Group 11, the potential benefits of group support and solidarity should not be underestimated. Although arguably important for all SMEs, this seemed to be particularly relevant for groups made up of members drawn from start-up companies for whom the confidence and encouragement to keep going appeared equally as important as learning the skills to develop their businesses. As one of the members of Group 11 described it:

Deidre: I think the thing that I've got from ProfitNet is actually I feel very safe …
              about opening up … about what I am, about my business … and it's such a
              safe environment. It doesn't matter what experience and background you've
              got, to actually have this … It's almost a little bit like a therapy session.

Even if members go away from their groups feeling better about themselves and have not necessarily learned anything specific, this is still something that they experienced as positive. The second conclusion reflects the opposite situation, as characterised by Group 10. In this

case, the low level of social cohesion within the group did not provide for the socio-emotional needs of its members and attendance levels began to decline. Both tendencies, in turn, had a negative impact on learning within the group as there was simultaneously little motivation to engage in knowledge-sharing at the same time as the pool of experiences was becoming smaller and smaller.

Conclusion

By breaking down the concepts of formality/informality into multiple dimensions, as well as seeing them as referring to social phenomena that have both ostensive and performative elements, this paper has explored some of the intersections between these dimensions and the tensions and paradoxes that can arise. A key conclusion concerns the under-determining influence of rules and structures of conduct. The ProfitNet programme is based around a standardised model that defines, in broad terms, the types and progression of activities to be undertaken by the learning groups. However, despite this common starting point, it should be clear that in practice the groups have followed a series of different trajectories. This is the result of a number of influences.

Firstly, the formal procedures and roles defined by the architects of the programme could never be a comprehensive guide to action and nor were they intended to be. The creators of the programme clearly recognised a potential conflict between providing a shared and commonly understood structure for group activities and developing the kind of social relations that are likely to promote collective learning. By leaving space for groups to develop their own specific practices within the overarching framework of the programme, it was almost inevitable that varieties of practice would emerge.

Secondly, although the intention was to establish a commonly understood framework, it was evident that the participants of different groups, and the facilitators and project managers responsible for their operation, developed somewhat different interpretations of their joint practices. This in turn meant that there tended to be variations in their performance of the standard procedures.

Thirdly, each of the groups exhibited rather different characteristics in terms of their socio-emotional dynamics that related in various ways to their formality in following the rules of the game. These configurations were influenced by the specific mixture of participants, with their own sets of knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes; the nature of the shared experiences that the groups encountered over time; and the norms and expectations that each developed. This lends the groups an emergent and unfolding character that is difficult to predict at the outset. A crucial implication of this is that rules and procedures themselves have no structuring influence without being performed within specific fields of practice and their performance varies from field to field and over time. This, in turn, suggests that those responsible for managing the process of collective learning as it unfolds, need to be able to recognise and adapt to these different trajectories. The facilitators, thus, play a critical role in guiding the groups and helping them to negotiate the balance between formality in rule-guided behaviour (i.e. structure learning) and informality in social relations (i.e. the development of group cohesion).

While the paper has offered a more nuanced way of understanding specific configurations of formality/informality in learning networks, there is still a considerable amount of work that needs to be done in understanding the implications of these configurations for learning and other network outcomes. Nevertheless, there are some preliminary indications that different mixtures of formality/informality in task-focus and socio-emotional dynamics are likely to have varying implications for what happens within the groups. These are summarised in Figure 2. This tentative mapping of the different relationships needs to be elaborated further and qualified in the light of the emerging data, particularly relating to the boundaries and

	Low	High
High Socio-emotional cohesion	Strong support, solidarity and group identity Sense of belonging Open exchange Unstructured/erratic learning	Strong support, solidarity and group identity Sense of belonging Open exchange Structured learning
Low	Low attachment to the group Barriers to knowledge-sharing Unstructured/erratic learning	Low attachment to the group Barriers to knowledge-sharing Structured learning undermined by lack of participation

Task-Focus

Figure 2: Implications of task-focus and socio-emotional cohesion

exceptions to the framework. However, the overall message is that where groups can be encouraged to follow a structured pattern of learning without over-formalising their social interactions and limiting the development of positive group dynamics, the greatest benefits are likely to accrue. Groups that develop as cohesive social units, but which leave their learning largely unstructured, are likely to experience the social benefits of group membership terms of safety and belonging. However, despite strong inclinations to share knowledge and experiences between participants, the benefits of this learning are likely to be dissipated through lack of consistent follow-through. Groups which exhibit highly structured task behaviours but do not develop cohesion may be able to follow a consistent pattern of learning, but participation in this process is likely to be limited and the group may ultimately fall apart. Finally, groups with low task-focus and low levels of cohesion are likely to suffer from both learning and social dysfunctions.

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