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Title Understanding part-time postgraduate student experience in the context of landscapes of practice – the experiences of Human Resource Management practitioners engaged in concurrent study
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SRHE Proposal

Understanding part-time postgraduate student experience in the context of landscapes of practice – the experiences of Human Resource Management practitioners engaged in concurrent study

Student experience is inherently influenced by its contextualised setting. This study explores one niche cohort that has wider ramifications, that of Human Resource Management (HRM) professionals who are engaged in part-time postgraduate study. HRM is a contested academic discipline and professional space (Marchington, 2015; Stewart, Mills and Sambrook, 2015), in which mid-career entry is not uncommon, and where study and professional membership are often key to career advancement (Tosey *et al.*, 2015). Thus, engagement with study to achieve this recognition generally occurs whilst working full-time, commonly at postgraduate level. However, understanding of the wider context of practitioner-student experience is limited, due to recognised gaps around research of part-time, taught postgraduate and mature student experience (e.g. Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit, 2008, 2010; Tobbell and O'Donnell 2013, Callender and Feldman, 2009; Jancey and Burns, 2013; Prince *et al.*, 2015). Within this, research on postgraduate experience tends to focus on research students, leaving taught students as a 'forgotten part of the sector' (Morgan, 2015, p.236, citing the Higher Education Commission, 2013). This is an odd omission given that such taught part-time postgraduates represent a potential growth area following the shift in funding through government support for postgraduate studies and the extension of degree apprenticeships into postgraduate levels.

This study explored these experiences in the context of communities of practice, and in particular the third, recent, phase of the model. Wenger-Trayner *et al.* (2015) identify this phase as the first to locate higher education alongside practice, focussing on identity across communities and relationships across landscapes of practice. In this, Fenton-O’Creevy *et al.* (2015a) suggest such practice based students are ‘tourists and sojourners’ within higher education, and this study has examined how these trajectories are experienced. The study focussed on two further aspects alongside this – social identity and academic literacies. Issues of social identity (Tajfel and Turner 2001) are implicitly recognised within situated learning, but also support a focus on the interplay of individual and collective community, are relevant of this to mature students, and applicable to concepts of liminality and student approaches to learning. Furthermore, the study also considers the impact of academic literacies (Lea and Street, 1998) to these students, given the recognition of the complexity of discourse practices within social settings, particularly for mature students (Lea, 1998) and part-time postgraduates (Hallett, 2010). In doing so, it responds to Fenton-O’Creevy *et al.* (2015b) and their explicit linking of academic literacies within landscapes of practice.

Method

This study utilised Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore reflective accounts of the lived experiences of five practitioner-students in one Higher Education Institution; although this is a small sample, it is consistent with the rigour and depth required by IPA (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Innovatively, the study used focus groups combined with semi-structured interviews, and utilised NVivo to assist analysis alongside other methods. Such use of focus groups is novel given their suggested incompatibility for IPA (Brocki and Wearden, 2006; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009), whilst support for the use of data analysis software, not common within IPA, is growing (Sohn, 2017).

Findings

Whilst the research is driven from an idiographic, individualised focus, three distinct themes could be seen across the experiences of the practitioner-student participants. These were the ways in which

part-time postgraduate study was positioned in the personal and professional context of each individual, the ways in which those individuals located themselves and others in the communities in which they engaged, and the ways in which they negotiated the boundaries between academic and practice communities. These are related to the conceptual idea of landscapes and constellations of practice, and of the negotiation with, and trajectories within, them.

The nexus of studying whilst managing career transition creates situations where the necessity to be successful in studies, thereby justifying employer or personal financial commitment, conflicts with a similar necessity to be successful in newly established professional roles. In this, time becomes a scant and significant resource, in ways that have implications for learning. Study triggered by career transitions also creates complex interactions between expert and novice identities across the academic and practice communities. The importance of expertise in practice settings is embodied in the views of, and interactions with, members of each community, with practice experience used to delineate in these, and where lack of practice experience affects the perceived legitimacy of academic expertise.

In crossing these academic-practice boundaries practitioner-students negotiate differing practices. Such negotiations are complex, requiring the adaption of dominant practice discourses to suit academic expectations. The approaches taken to learning thereby are significantly affected by both the implications of part-time study as time intensive, and the views of the academic community as not necessarily practice relevant, compounded by the assumptions of academic staff regarding the academic competence of practitioner-students. Practitioner-students consequently develop approaches to learning which foreground and adapt their practice experience, and are most successful where a concurrency between the two can be achieved. Where this cannot occur, the subsuming of practice expertise for dominant academic discourses is troubling for practitioner-students given the purpose of study to validate their experience, prior to their postgraduate programme.

Conclusions and Recommendations

I therefore propose that in this setting, practitioner-student experience is determined by the negotiation of the academic-practice community boundary, delineated and influenced by the embodiment of expertise and underlined by peripheral and transient academic engagement. Underlying this, and perhaps most significantly contributing to it, is the personal and professional context of the individual. This has implications on a broader context, as whilst this is a niche student community, it has resonance across other similar post-experience cohorts.

I suggest that attention should be paid to recognising these complex positions for such students, acknowledging their liminal career positions, and their complex work-life balance negotiations. In parallel to this, explicit acknowledgement of the practise expertise of practitioner-students, and of academics working with them, is key to creating cohesive communities across the academic-practice boundary. Support for practitioner-students also needs to enable the adaption of familiar practitioner discourse practices into less familiar academic settings, targeting activities which recognise the time pressure of such students, and which encourage the exploration of personal viewpoints.

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