

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Communities of Practice in a first-year business course: developing students' meta-cognition for employability through modelling against future selves

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**Research Domain:** Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

**Abstract:** As TEF core metrics place growing focus on graduate employability as a determinant of UK universities' success, universities seek increasing collaboration with employers. This paper explores the impact of a doctoral Action Research (AR) project developing a nascent Community of Practice (CoP) (Lave and Wenger, 1991), and the impact of both CoP and AR upon students' employability-related meta-cognitive skills. Two employers, both experienced practitioners in management roles and successful alumni, joined group discussions four times over two semesters. Whilst students developed skills, language and behaviours as expected of a CoP, an unpredicted outcome was some students' exceptional modelling of reflective practices through; observation of established employers' own reflection, engagement with myself as module leader and researcher, and participation in the AR itself. This suggests the value of scalable replication of such practices and AR itself.

Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Paper:** The prominence of graduate employability in determining UK universities' 'success' is exemplified in the recent upweighting of employment metrics in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) core metrics. This reflects the dominant assumption that universities lead in developing graduate skills that underpin national economic success in the UK's knowledge economy (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016): an assumption influencing choice of university for applicants through a 'value for money' calculation of future earnings and an equitable return on fees (Tomlinson, 2017).

While many contest the validity of such metrics, explicit graduate employability strategies are standard, for example through guest lectures, authentic assessment and co-designing course content with employers. However, the gap between employers' expectations and the employability of new

graduates persists (Confederation of British Industry (CBI)/National Union of Students (NUS), 2011), as employers report that graduates overestimate their emotional intelligence, professionalism, and leadership abilities, amongst other attributes, while graduates consider their skills adequate for employment (Matsouka and Mihail, 2016). Furthermore, only 54% of students thought the importance of employability had even been explained while at university, and just 49% felt clear about employers' requirements (CBI/NUS, 2011).

With mainstream integration of artificial intelligence and longer lifespans, future graduates will need to navigate employability through unpredictable social and economic structures. This requires meta-cognitive skills to self-assess attributes in such contexts, a skill dependent on ongoing self-reflection and lifelong learning but often overlooked in employability development in favour of 'shopping lists' of graduate skills. This is a significant shift, as many students consider achieving a 2:1 or above ('good honours') sufficient for ensuring employment, while underestimating the utility value of soft skills and extracurricular activities (Ackerman, Gross and Perner, 2003). However, students' low engagement in placements may also be attributed to low confidence or lack of information (Bullock et al., 2009). Therefore, there is a need to challenge students' assumptions regarding employability, build confidence, be explicit about employers' expectations and develop such meta-cognition. This is required early in students' university careers to maximise uptake of, and success in securing, placements, work-integrated learning and other work opportunities while at university. However, *undergraduates'* understandings and experiences of developing employability attributes remain underrepresented in the literature. Furthermore, many interventions in business schools are led by academic staff who may be distanced from industry or are on-off guest lectures from employers with relatively little dialogue with students.

This doctoral study adopted an Action Research approach, establishing a nascent Community of Practice (CoP) in a first-year marketing module in a post-1992 business school, facilitating students' direct access to employers on an ongoing basis in a quasi-professional context. The CoP incorporated 19 students, two employers (who were also alumni), careers staff and myself, the academic module lead. Lave and Wenger's (1991) CoP theory informs vocational learning in professional contexts, building upon Vygotskian (1978) principles of the critical role of social interactions in learning and the enabling role of others. Students engage in Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) as they observe and participate in the implicit values, behaviours, language and understandings of their future professional community, developing a 'shared repertoire' through their journey from newcomer to eventual 'old timer' (Wenger, 1998).

Three cycles of research were completed over this year-long module, with four data collection points, i.e. baseline and the conclusion of each cycle. Data sources included; four interviews with each of four students and two employers at each data collection point, four CoP discussion outputs, and three submissions of all 19 students' reflections and self-assessments of their developing attributes. Given the nature of Action Research, students participated in determining the activities of the next cycle, based upon analysis of the preceding cycle, and co-creating module content. This developed individuals' research literacy and reflective skills through observation and incorporation of analysis into ongoing practice.

The study commenced by exploring the well-documented gap between graduates' and employers' perceptions of attribute requirements (Little and Archer, 2010), and developed, through group

consensus, into exploring and developing specific core attributes (teamwork, communication, confidence and resilience), and wider discussion regarding life-long marketing career trajectories. Most students somewhat improved specific employability skills, however their meta-cognition related to employability showed significant development. Analysis of class discussions and interviews suggests this was facilitated by students identifying with their 'future selves' in the two employers as alumni, and observing the employers' current highly reflective practice, despite 20-35 years of employment and prominent management roles.

This paper focuses upon the development of employability-related meta-cognition, modelled through reflective practice by both employers and academic staff in their own, ongoing, real-world practice. This development manifested through students' emerging awareness of their attribute levels in the context of real-world employment, resulting, in some cases, in downgrading self-assessments of current skill levels. Many students' understandings evolved from absolute definitions of attributes to more nuanced, context-driven and self-forgiving interpretations. Some reported a beneficial 'creep' of their developing reflective skills into other areas, developing skills transferable beyond conventional employment. Some students demonstrated significant shifts in identity through participation in this action research approach, moving from passive listeners to active learners and burgeoning employees, and reflecting upon their evolving standpoint and future trajectory. Reflecting on an end-of-year visit to a marketing agency, respondents concluded that CoP interactions had significantly developed their confidence to engage with new people, particularly employers.

This paper concludes that universities' focus upon graduate attributes could be effectively delivered through the scalable replication of practices implemented through this study, namely CoPs modelling the reflective practices of established practitioners who personify students' possible future selves, and ongoing observation of practitioner narratives, rather than one-off guest lectures. Academic staff can also model such practices through their own research and/or teaching, seeking to dispel the conception that a 2:1 or above is sufficient to guarantee future career success, and to encourage students' ongoing reflection and immediate action both within the curriculum and beyond.

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