

Fostering meaning: fostering community. (0092)

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Outline

Wenger's (1998) intricate depiction of 'communities of practice' and the conditions that allow such communities to flourish or languish has been highly influential in research into higher education in recent years. While there is a need for 'caution in depicting undergraduate courses as disciplinary 'communities of practice' ' (Anderson and Hounsell, 2007, 468), the aim of this presentation is not to deconstruct the idea of communities of learners, but to highlight the complexities which emerge when this perspective is employed to make sense of learning and teaching in higher education. More specifically, this paper is focused on three interconnected areas of analysis:

- the commitments and intentions displayed by the participants,
- the knowledge practices around which these communities centre and
- the conceptualisation of the nature of communication and the creation of meaning within learning communities.

We begin by building on a feature of Wenger's (1998) account, considering how his depiction of learners' 'trajectories' in relation to communities of practice can inform our understanding of the *commitments* which learners may form as they come to identify with particular communities. A learner's trajectory is their sense of a path of development in relation to a particular community of practice. Where learners come to envisage a trajectory which brings closer identification with a particular community this can have a notably positive impact on their engagement with their studies (McCune, 2009). Thus Wenger's work signals the particular importance of those learning activities which encourage a sense of inbound trajectory among learners. This does, however, leave open the question of how to support engagement among the many learners who will not intend to become full participants in a particular community but who may come nonetheless to value the practices of that community.

This question of trajectories is then considered in relation to Barnett's recent work (Barnett, 2007; Barnett and Coate, 2005) which can be seen to draw attention to the types of *commitments* that may be required of both students and staff if a learning community is to be engendered and the *forms of being* that may be demanded of students in such a community – ontological demands that we argue have not been given sufficient prominence in preceding discussions of communities of practice within higher education.

Viewing learning in higher education through the lens of communities of practice directs attention toward how meaning is negotiated within its social and cultural contexts (Lea, 2005). This suggests that supporting learners in higher education requires consideration of how best to conceptualise the knowledge practices that characterise learning communities in higher education and the orientations towards

knowledge, (and towards discussions concerning knowledge), that are expected of students. In taking ahead our delineation of the knowledge practices that characterise higher education teaching and learning environments, we draw out points of comparison and distinct contrast with the account of these matters provided in the communities of practice literature; and draw out implications for practice, shedding light on why even experienced learners often struggle with classroom discussion and assessed work tasks as they work to negotiate the practices of particular communities, rather than reapplying generic skills.

This analysis of knowledge practices leads in turn to an examination of the nature of communication and the creation of meaning within learning communities. Wenger's (1998) account gives relatively scant attention to the nature of communication within learning communities. This leaves a significant gap in our understanding of how to resolve the challenges faced by students. Rommetveit's subtle account of how commonality of reference can be achieved to a degree (e.g. Rommetveit, 1992) against the background of 'a world we assume to be multifaceted, only partially shared' (Rommetveit, 1974, 34) offers valuable insights here. According to Rommetveit, a crucial matter for the coordination of attention and intention, is the sufficient sharing of perspectives on the matter that is under discussion (Rommetveit, 1974, 1990; Graumann, 1995). Implications of this emphasis on perspectivity for the fostering of learning communities are drawn out; and issues surrounding the relative power and authority of interactants, including their capacity to set the perspectives under which topics will be viewed, are examined.

Building on this consideration of Rommetveit's work, a concluding section explores how Law's (2004, 62) advocacy of an ontology of the 'in-between', of partial connection, may be an appropriate way in which to frame our understanding of the challenges that university lecturers face in fostering communities of learners.

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