

## **New academic groups, new ways of learning? (0137)**

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In response to government led policy changes and other demands, higher education institutions are often required to rethink the way they work. One trend has been to establish new working groups, often existing teaching staff, who are seconded for some or all of their time to disseminate new strategic initiatives.

At the research site for this study, for example, newly formed groups such as learning and teaching co-ordinators, educational technology leaders and widening participation co-ordinators have been charged with interpreting, developing and disseminating policy initiatives introduced following the 1997 National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (the 'Dearing Report').

With such moves, new roles for academic staff begin to develop which encompass more than traditional research, teaching and administration. Such groups are expected to be able to develop new practices and encourage colleagues to do the same. It is notable that members rarely have any formalised training, yet are somehow expected to know how to carry out their new role.

An initial study of the literature suggested that work on communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) would be helpful in understanding the learning of such groups. The notion of communities of practice is based on a theory of learning as part of social activity, with an emphasis on the social and cultural processes that shape learning. By proposing that a community of practice involves participants' shared understanding about what they are doing within a particular work environment, learning is not simply about the acquisition of particular knowledge and skills, but it also involves moving towards full participation in the social and cultural practices of an organisation or a community.

Although widely cited, the concept of communities of practice has nonetheless received criticism (Evans *et al.*, 2006; Fuller *et al.*, 2005; Thorpe and Kubiak, 2005). In particular, Fuller *et al.* (2005) note the stable and cohesive nature of many of the examples given by Lave and Wenger. Certainly for this study, the newly-formed group was far from stable and had yet to establish any shared ways of working.

More recent studies have highlighted the complex and diverse nature of participation in the workplace (Fuller *et al.* 2005) and it has been apparent that no one theory can adequately deal with all aspects (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2004). It is generally accepted to be relational (Evans *et al.*, 2006) where no single factor can be identified as more important than another.

In this study, the focus was on the practices of a newly-formed working group at a UK higher education institution. Sixteen in-depth interviews with eleven learning and teaching co-ordinators were recorded, transcribed and analysed with the aim of understanding the learning of the members of the group.

### **Towards an understanding of workplace learning**

As participants discussed their work and how they developed understanding, it became apparent that they engaged in a series of practices, sometimes related overtly to the activities derived from the organisation and expressed specifically on their job description, but sometimes activities were almost “auxiliary” to the job description. Two broad clusters emerged from the findings: organisationally-derived practice clusters and agency-derived practice clusters. The first include those practices which can be categorised as “systemic” or “routine”, “project” and “knowledge construction” and they largely reflect practices explicitly associated with the role of a learning and teaching co-ordinator. These clusters closely reflect Giddens’ (1976) definition of practice which focuses on rule governed routine behaviour, although the rules are not always understood, which might explain why we see the emergence of a second cluster of practices. The second cluster, which relate to “auxiliary” or “support” practices, are necessary for engagement in the organisationally-derived clusters and include “navigation”, “legitimation”, and “affirmation” practices. In circumstances which are new, and concepts are not yet familiar, participants need to acquire new propositional knowledge, but more importantly, understand the way things work. These agency-derived practice clusters appear to help participants understand the tacit “rules” and the way things work, so that they can move towards routine behaviours. They also contribute to the legitimation of participants so that they will be listened to, providing the reassurance and motivation needed to continue.

Overall, this study confirms that learning in the workplace of a newly formed group is highly complex (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2004a) as members seek new propositional knowledge as well as knowledge of how we do things around here, systems and structures, sources of influence and how to communicate.

The study suggests that members of a new group need time and space to engage in a series of varied practice clusters to be able to learn in the work place. These clusters cross many communities of practice but are driven by individual needs relating to learning how to carry out the new role. The value of this study is its focus on the individual's practice clusters (and how these develop) rather than on communities of practice.

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