

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN THE WORKPLACE: A CASE  
STUDY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Deborah J Anderson

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Lancaster University



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# PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN THE WORKPLACE: A CASE STUDY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

## ABSTRACT

With the aim of contributing to understanding of learning in the workplace, this thesis uses a case study approach to explore the learning of a newly-formed community of practice in the complex environment of higher education.

Social theories of learning, based on a paradigm where learning is part of a social activity, have emerged to explain how individuals and groups develop knowledge in the workplace. Whilst studies to date have focussed on established communities of practice, very little work has examined how a new group, with no established experts or ways of working, learns in the workplace.

Analysis of interview data from a newly-formed group of eleven learning and teaching co-ordinators revealed a series of practice clusters in which participants appear to engage. Organisationally-derived practice clusters, categorised as systemic, project and knowledge construction practices, relate to tasks identified on the job description. Data analysis also revealed four clusters of agency-derived practice: navigation practices, legitimation practices, affirmation practices and motivation practices.

As participants engage in both organisationally-derived and agency-derived practice clusters, they draw upon, and in turn develop, resources which I have grouped into resource clusters comprising knowledge resources and enabling resources, specifically support, guidance, feedback and confidence.

The contribution of the research is its focus on the learning of a newly-formed community of practice. Specifically, I propose that to understand the learning of such a community, it is useful to focus on the complex dynamic between the practice clusters in which the members engage and the resource clusters developed and drawn upon. The influence of both individual and organisational factors should be considered, and whilst neither should be given priority, it is likely that the individual will be more proactive, particularly in seeking out support, than a member of an established community of practice.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

This introductory chapter is divided into six sections. I will start by outlining the aims of the study, followed by an explanation of the inspiration for the research. The theoretical and policy contexts will be introduced, followed by an explanation of the research questions. An overview of the approach to the research and a summary structure of the thesis will also form part of this introduction.

### **1.1 Research aim**

The aim of this thesis is to contribute to understanding of learning in the workplace. With a focus on a new community of practice in a higher education institution, I will analyse the extent to which existing social theories of learning can explain the learning of a new working group in a complex organisation. I will attempt to contribute to those theories and to make practical recommendations, both in terms of further research and in the form of suggestions for higher education practitioners. With these aims, I believe I will contribute to the development of knowledge in two of the ways identified by Bassey (1999). Firstly, I am problematising existing theoretical ideas, notably those developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) relating to communities of practice and secondly, I am aiming to “provide a significant piece in the jigsaw of understanding” (Bassey, 1999, p.87) of learning in the workplace.

### **1.2 Initial inspiration**

I developed an interest in the learning of groups in the workplace when appointed to the position of learning and teaching co-ordinator in one faculty

at Riverside University in 2003. Riverside University is a post-1992 institution with just over 19,000 students. Its first learning and teaching strategy was introduced in 2000, in response to national higher education initiatives, specifically the 1997 National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education.

As one of a group of seven learning and teaching co-ordinators (one in each faculty), my role was to contribute to the implementation of the university's learning and teaching strategy, in other words, encourage change in the organisation. Without resources such as administrative support or budgets (other than small-scale funded projects), co-ordinators were expected to disseminate good practice, support colleagues in projects and report on learning and teaching initiatives. However, as the group had only been established in 2000, very few clear ways of working had been developed. The group appeared to be very much at an emergent stage.

Initial personal experience in the role was bewildering. Appointed in 2003, I spent the first six months trying to work out what I was supposed to do. I reported to the dean of the faculty who was supportive, but provided no direction for my day to day responsibilities. I also reported to a member of the University's Academic Development Centre who provided reassurance that I was fulfilling the role. The position was graded as a principal lecturer and accounted for .4 of my time. The remaining .6 enabled me to continue as principal lecturer in my subject discipline. This combination of discipline-based lecturer and learning and teaching co-ordinator was deliberate, to ensure that co-ordinators were in touch with the realities of teaching. To add to my

confusion, conversations with co-ordinator colleagues in other faculties revealed vast differences, both in the way departments were managed, and also in the way individual co-ordinators were guided (or not). The whole experience led me to question how such a group could learn and develop in the role.

Enrolling on the Doctoral Programme at Lancaster University in 2004 provided an opportunity to study and reflect upon my experiences in detail. Several short assignments for a reflective module “In-practice learning and development” exposed me to some of the explanatory frameworks that helped to make sense of the situation. For example, the role was seen as strategically important, yet nobody from the Academic Development Centre was able to give me any clear, detailed direction. With hindsight and having studied the situation in depth, I realise that this was because the differences in each faculty in terms of structure, culture and processes (Alvesson, 2002) meant that it was virtually impossible to standardise the role. As a result, the job description is vague and does not set out in detail how the co-ordinator is expected to work. This will be explored more thoroughly in chapter four.

In addition to short, reflective pieces of work on the Doctoral Programme, more substantial assignments provided further opportunities to explore some focused aspects of the learning and teaching co-ordinator role. For example, my research for the Education, Training and Work module concluded that despite a lack of experts, a newly formed group, comprising all novices can appear to function as a community of practice, drawing support from other

members. However, whilst it offered a valuable, initial explanatory framework, Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation did not seem sufficient for helping to fully understand the way such a newly formed community works, and in particular to understand how the learning of the group members developed. Nonetheless, despite the absence of experts within the community, (who may define what constitutes legitimate peripheral participation) my analysis of the discussion data suggested that members did find participation in specific projects helpful, as a way of building a knowledge base. Projects were often those identified as contributing to the university's learning and teaching strategy, such as introducing peer mentoring schemes or embedding key skills in the curriculum. The identification of the importance of engagement in projects inspired the topic choice for my thesis.

I was also inspired by the possibility of the practical application of the findings. My study should be of interest to those working in newly-formed and existing communities of practice in higher education. It may also be useful for managers of those groups in coming to an understanding about how newly formed groups develop and learn in their role. A strong relationship with the Academic Development Centre at the institution should enable me to develop recommendations both for this group and others such as Educational Technology Leaders who are charged with instigating technological change. Indeed, Higher Education has many examples of groups which include departmental or faculty representatives, often with a view to managing change, e.g., Academic Skills co-ordinators, Faculty Administration Managers, Student Liaison Officers.

To summarise, despite Bloomer's (2001) view that a "robust and fully comprehensive theory of as complex phenomenon as learning is, at best, a distant prospect and may never prove achievable" (Bloomer, 2001 p.444), I nonetheless believe that it is possible to further our understanding of learning in the workplace.

### **1.3 Theoretical frameworks**

The theoretical context for this thesis appears to be in a developmental phase. In studies of workplace learning, Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) have ensured that social learning has come to the forefront with their seminal work on communities of practice and legitimate peripheral participation. Lave and Wenger's work is based on a paradigm where learning is part of a social activity, with an emphasis on the social and cultural processes which shape learning. Communities of practice are defined as "a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.98). This is in contrast to a view which sees the individual as a receptacle of knowledge and individual learning as paramount. Within a community of practice, Lave and Wenger see the participants sharing understanding about what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities (Lave and Wenger, 1991). They propose that rather than simply acquiring new skills and knowledge, participants' learning involves moving towards full participation in a community's social and cultural practices. This could include becoming familiar with the language used, the acceptable types of interaction and the likes and dislikes of the group.

Whilst Lave and Wenger's work appears to be widely accepted, there are nonetheless criticisms, notably from Fuller *et al.* (2005) who challenge the link between experience and expertise, suggesting that often novices can bring new skills (for example computer skills) to a community of practice, which can then be shared with old-timers. Throughout Lave and Wenger's work, there is reference to the "flow" of novices given increasing responsibility over time, but little consideration to a community where all members are novices.

Despite the criticisms, the move away from a focus on behaviourist and cognitive theories which focus on individual learning has been firmly established, and recent studies of learning in the workplace continue to conceive learning as a socially situated process which requires consideration of relationships, practices and the work context (Fuller and Unwin, 2004a; Billet, 2002a). Consequently, the workplace has emerged as an important site for learning (Fuller and Unwin, 2004a), with different environments providing varied opportunities for participation which invariably lead to learning.

Workplace learning is generally accepted to be relational (Evans *et al.*, 2006) where no single factor can be identified as more important than another. In this vein, Eraut (2004, 2007) has combined both social and individual perspectives to identify factors affecting learning in the workplace, but acknowledges that from the large number of contexts studied, it is assumed that all will work differently. His recent work (Eraut, 2007) on early career professional learning focuses on nursing, engineering and accountancy,

providing useful models for understanding the significant learning factors in a professional working environment.

My work sits firmly in this arena, bringing an alternative perspective, that of a newly-formed, emerging group in a complex work environment. Chapter three will provide an overview of the theoretical context, focussing on the areas of learning, practice, knowledge and expertise. Explanatory frameworks developed from the literature will then be used to analyse findings from my research in chapters five and six.

#### **1.4 The policy context**

Higher education in the UK provides the policy context for my research. Government initiatives have led to major changes across the university sector, including the introduction of the learning and teaching co-ordinator group at Riverside University. The 1997 National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE, and often referred to as the Dearing Report) instigated a growing national emphasis on learning and teaching in higher education across UK universities. This led to the introduction of the first learning and teaching strategy at the research site, along with the recruitment of professional groups charged with its implementation. Other changes contributed to an increasingly turbulent environment: student numbers were increasing, foundation degrees were being introduced, widening participation initiatives were being promoted and the nature of the student body was changing rapidly to include increasing numbers of non-traditional students. Key skills and employability became major agenda items and the Quality Assurance Agency continued to introduce new guidance on issues such as

assessment and feedback and student placements. Alongside policy changes, technological developments meant that staff were expected to use learning management systems and other electronic resources to support student learning. A detailed analysis of the policy context will be discussed in chapter four.

## **1.5 Developing an approach to the research**

Developing the research questions was not straightforward and involved an iterative process over a period of time. My starting point was to question how a working group in higher education, with no formal training could learn and develop in the role. I was interested in both the similarities and the differences in the group. Specifically, I was interested in whether Lave and Wenger's communities of practice theory and work on legitimate peripheral participation were sufficient to explain the learning of such a group.

In developing the research questions, I came across the issue of whether this group could be considered "professional". Whilst there are several definitions available, often, they focus upon on a list of characteristics such as autonomy, specialist knowledge and publicly derived authority (Saunders, 1995a).

Saunders (1995a) also comments on the slack way "professional" is used in the context of learning, a criticism I was keen to avoid! Therefore, I decided that for the purpose of developing the research questions, I would define the group of learning and teaching co-ordinators as professionals; however, I would explore this in more detail in the course of the thesis.

Original research questions focussed on the knowledge resources of the working group and how the knowledge resources were informing practice. However, review of current literature highlighted the research questions developed by Eraut's (2007) work on early career learning at work and I felt that a much simpler set of questions, based upon these would be more illuminating.

The questions developed for Eraut's research were:

- What is being learned?
- How is it being learned?
- What factors affect the level and direction of the learning effort?

By adapting these questions for my own research, I would be able to compare my findings relating to an emerging professional working group with more established professions such as the nurses, accountants and engineers studied by Eraut (2007). However, as I also specifically wanted to evaluate the relevance and value of some of the existing social theories of learning, I also added a question specifically focusing on legitimate peripheral participation. Finally, I wanted to ensure that my research had some practical value in the workplace, so added a question focussing on the managerial implications of a new community of practice. Therefore the questions for my research are:

- How can we explain the learning of a new community of practice in higher education?

- What is being learned in a new community of practice in higher education?
- How is it being learned?
- What factors affect the learning?
- Does legitimate peripheral participation offer a full explanation of the learning of a new community of practice?
- What are the implications for managing the learning of the members of a new community of practice?

With such a turbulent policy environment, a complex research site and an emerging group, I felt that a methodological approach which would allow for flexibility would be important. Given the research questions, and a research aim which seeks to further understanding, it was unlikely that I was going to find one “right answer”. As a result, the chosen methodology was based on a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews would enable me to amend the interview guide as the interviews progressed to incorporate unanticipated themes and ideas emerging from the transcripts. I also wanted the reassurance of being able to revisit participants to pursue further the emerging themes. In addition, coming from a position based on a social practice view of the world, I would need the opportunity to analyse different perspectives within different contexts. Specifically, I chose a case study approach, focussing on the learning experiences of the group of learning and teaching co-ordinators, and incorporating national and institutional policy documents. Data collection included in-depth interviews

with eleven learning and teaching co-ordinators and a member of the institution's Academic Development Centre.

This type of case study research is acknowledged to be a useful approach for understanding complex social environments (Cousin, 2005), which can help the researcher to produce "thick" descriptions (McPherson *et al.*, 2000, p.58). Case studies allow for the close examination of events, experiences and situations by reconstructing and interpreting these phenomena (McKee, 2004). Merriam (1998) acknowledges that case studies are particularly useful if the researcher is interested in studying a process. Further detailed explanation of methodology and methods can be found in chapter two.

Findings will be presented in chapter five within a framework of categories which emerged from the interview data. Findings will be analysed and discussed in the light of existing explanatory frameworks in chapter six. Finally, conclusions in chapter seven will specifically address the research questions and provide recommendations both for further academic work and for managers in higher education responsible for new groups.

## **1.6 Structure of the thesis**

Whilst it may appear that I knew from the start what would happen in my research, and that it moved in a logical, linear direction, in reality I am taking advice from Bassey (1999) who suggests that it is acceptable in thesis writing to use "structured reporting" to make it easy for the audience to follow. For example the review of existing theoretical frameworks in chapter three began before any interviews occurred with the aim of finding out what type of studies

had already taken place relating to learning in the workplace. Analysis of the interview data began by looking for themes already identified in the existing literature but as new themes emerged, I returned to the literature to explore these and to compare my findings with those already documented by other researchers. Similarly, data analysis took place alongside the gathering of the data and some of the participants were interviewed a second and even third time as themes began to emerge. The following chapter outline, therefore, should not be read as a reflection of a logical sequence of events, but rather as a "structured report" (Bassey, 1999 p.84) with the benefit of reflection, hindsight and constant re-writes:

Chapter one: Introduction

Chapter two: Methodology and methods

Chapter three: Learning in the workplace: what do we know already?

Chapter four: The context of the research

Chapter five: Findings

Chapter six: Analysis and discussion

Chapter seven: Conclusions

References

## **Chapter Two: Methodology and methods**

This chapter will explain the context of the research and the ways in which I addressed the research questions. I will discuss the methodological issues and provide a rationale for the case study approach. I will also provide an account of the data generation, analysis and presentation. Ethical issues, and particularly those associated with insider research will complete the chapter. In the final chapter of the thesis, I will return to reflect on the methods chosen and evaluate their usefulness.

### **2.1 The research context**

The context of the research is the turbulent, changing environment of higher education, and the focus is on the learning of a new group charged with facilitating learning and teaching change. The research site, Riverside University is a post-1992 university with seven faculties offering a range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses to just over 19,000 students. Like other higher education institutions, Riverside has been subjected to a whole series of policy changes since the publication of the 1997 National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (often referred to as the Dearing Report). Indeed, it was this report which led to the introduction of the first learning and teaching strategy at the research site in 2000, along with the recruitment of a group of learning and teaching co-ordinators charged with its implementation. At the same time, a group of education technology leaders was recruited to ensure the launch of the university's first institution-wide electronic learning management system, Blackboard. Both groups were recruited from existing teaching staff who continued to teach in their respective faculties on a part-

time basis. Funding came from Widening Participation monies for the learning and teaching co-ordinators, and from Teaching Quality Enhancement funding for the educational technology leaders. Both groups reported to the institution's central Academic Development Centre for their learning and teaching/education technology roles, remaining in their faculties on a day-to-day basis. I was recruited into the group of learning and teaching co-ordinators in 2003 and, as I have outlined in the introduction to this thesis, became interested in how groups such as these were able to learn.

Specifically, at this research site, I am seeking to address the following research questions:

- How can we explain the learning of a new community of practice in higher education?
  - What is being learned in a new community of practice in higher education?
  - How is it being learned?
  - What factors affect the learning?
- Does legitimate peripheral participation offer a full explanation of the learning of a new community of practice?
- What are the implications for managing the learning of the members of a new community of practice?

## **2.2 Methodological issues**

My own position both as a researcher generally and in relation to the context of the research has naturally affected the methodological approach to the

thesis. Within the context of the research, I am in the position of “insider” in that I am a member of the working group being studied. This is discussed in detail below, in the penultimate section of this chapter.

As a researcher, my understanding is that the social world does not exist as a reality “out there” waiting to be uncovered. I think the social world can be understood by collecting accounts (interpretations) of “reality” from actors in a social setting, i.e. reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds (Merriam, 1998). It is worth noting that “reality” when constructed in this way is further complicated as it is wholly based on the perceptions of the respondents and in turn, my interpretation of those perceptions. I also do not believe that research in the social world can necessarily come up with answers, but that the value of research is in its ability to offer new explanatory frameworks for social phenomena. From these explanations, it is possible to develop specific recommendations, but these will need to be adjusted and adapted, according to the context and circumstances of their application.

With this position in mind, I felt that a qualitative approach would be most appropriate in that it would provide a more open and involved approach than one which assumes the existence of an objective reality and where a more standardised, quantified approach could be valid (Flick *et al.*, 2004).

Qualitative research can be open to new ideas in the area being studied, whilst standardised methods for the design of data-collection instruments, such as questionnaires, need some prior understanding of the subject under investigation. A qualitative approach would therefore be the most effective

way of capturing the in-depth data required, yet still allow some flexibility as the work progressed.

Whilst qualitative research has acknowledged strengths in its ability to produce rich, in-depth data, it is nonetheless subject to criticism which requires consideration when developing the research design. The distinction between qualitative and quantitative methodologies has been discussed at length in the nursing literature (Avis, 1995) as a result of the distinction between medical research (largely within the natural science arena) and nursing research (more often concerned with social research). In particular, the criteria for substantiating validity claims are not necessarily the same in all methodologies. Validity, as understood from a quantitative research (deriving from the natural sciences) point of view is not necessarily appropriate for qualitative research (Avis, 1995; Mason, 1996; Rubin and Rubin, 1995). Schofield (1993) examines the nature of external validity linking it to “generalisability” which is often seen as something worthwhile in the quantitative tradition. However, in the qualitative tradition, whilst concerned with validity and reliability, few authors attach importance to the notion of generalisability, appearing to consider it unimportant or unachievable. For example, Schofield (1993) points out that however important external validity may be to particular traditions, it is clear that many qualitative studies, often focusing on single case studies are inconsistent with the requirements of statistical sampling procedures. Schofield however does not have an issue with this, arguing that the goal of qualitative research is not to produce a set of results which could then be replicated, rather it is to produce an insight into a

situation based on detailed study. Yin (2003) has a further view on generalisation, suggesting that case studies, like experiments, are not generalisable to populations or universes but could be to theoretical propositions (Yin, 2003).

Avis (1995) summarises a view on validity which suggests that the central epistemological issue should be how an empirical account can be shown to be an adequate representation of phenomena. In a similar approach, Mason (2002) suggests that a qualitative researcher must ask whether the findings have validity, i.e., am I identifying what I say I am? Furthermore, Rubin and Rubin (1995) suggest that notions of transparency, consistency-coherence and communicability (Rubin and Rubin, 1995) are more appropriate and qualitative researchers should consider a research design which achieves these.

Attempts have been made to replace the criteria used in quantitative research with more appropriate ones (Avis, 1995). For example, internal validity is replaced by “credibility” (expressed in reflective accounts which recognise the researcher’s lived experiences in the research account); external validity is replaced by “fittingness” or “transferability” (where the researcher discusses how the work could be applied to other contexts); reliability is dealt with by developing “auditability” or “dependability” where an audit trail is presented allowing the reader to judge for themselves the researcher’s thinking; neutrality concerns whether the researcher can show that analysis and findings truly emerge from the data collected.

To conclude, my own position as a researcher and the issues relating to qualitative methodologies have been considered when designing the research for this thesis. The specific methods will now be outlined and will include data generation and data presentation.

### **2.3 The case study approach**

Within a qualitative framework, a case study approach has been selected as the method best suited to answering the research questions. With its acknowledged strength of advancing understanding of complex social environments (Cousin, 2005) and a capability of producing “thick” descriptions, case study approaches enable the researcher to “see anew” (McPherson *et al.*, 2000, p.58) social phenomena. Others have described this as making the familiar unfamiliar and aiming to see what previously went unnoticed (McKee, 2004). Case studies facilitate the close examination of events, experiences and situations by reconstructing and interpreting these phenomena, usually in the form of a text (McKee, 2004). They allow the researcher to be more spontaneous and flexible (Al Rubaie, 2002) and are particularly useful if the researcher is interested in studying a process (Merriam, 1998). Case studies can also help to understand the complexity of social truths, revealing the similarities and discrepancies between different participants’ views and allowing for alternative interpretations of the same phenomenon (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Whilst there is no agreement upon how a researcher should define a case (McKee, 2004), attempts have been made. For example, Bassey (1999)

defines case study research by suggesting that an essential feature is sufficient data which enable researchers to explore significant features of the case and offer an interpretation. In addition, the case study is mainly conducted in its natural context.

Stake (1995) compares the “intrinsic” case study where the objective is to understand the case in hand, to the “instrumental” (Stake, 1995) case where the aim is to tell the reader about something in general. Furthermore, different perspectives of case study research have emerged: an interpretive approach would aim to develop understanding of meanings and motivations and rules guiding interactions, whereas a critical approach would aim to critique values and norms, with the ultimate aim of advancing alternative models (McPherson *et al.*, 2000). This study will include both intrinsic and instrumental elements (Stake, 1995), using an interpretive approach (McPherson *et al.*, 2000).

The distinction between “case” (the object of the study) and “case study” (the research method) is important (Bergen and While, 2000). In addition, the unit of analysis and sub-units require definition. In this study, the case is the learning of a new professional group of learning and teaching co-ordinators in higher education, specifically in a post-1992 university. The unit of analysis can be divided into two parts: the “main unit” and the “sub units” (Bergen and While, 2000; Yin, 1994). The main unit is the group as a whole and the sub-units will be the individual members of the group. The group comprises eleven individuals, working in a part-time role as learning and teaching co-ordinators.

The case study method has been supported in several studies of workplace learning (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2003; Evans *et al.*, 2006; Thorpe and Kubiak, 2005). Hodkinson (2005) identifies that learning is always complex and relational, with no factors or influences that are more or less significant than others. As factors contributing to learning can vary from location to location, a case study approach to research in this area is acceptable. Lave (1996) also acknowledges wide differences in what and how learners learn, suggesting that understanding can develop if we explore each practice separately. Whilst analysis is limited to one case, the approach does have the advantage of grounding arguments in perceptions of concrete experiences rather than abstract theory (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2003). If the inter-relationships between individuals and the workplace (rather than the focus on one or the other) provide a more complete understanding of learning in the workplace (Evans *et al.*, 2006), then a case study approach is ideal. Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2003) propose that individuals are often acknowledged but under-developed and under-theorised in studies of workplace learning. A case study approach which includes individual interviews will enable my research to overcome this weakness.

The setting of the research is important. In some types of qualitative research (ethnography, observational research) the aim is to study whatever is under scrutiny within its own habitat. This contrasts, for example, with experimental research where the setting would be contrived. The case study approach, whilst not completely naturalistic (Cousin, 2005), nonetheless strives to ensure respondents feel comfortable, as near to their own habitat as possible, by

conducting interviews at their place of work, using examples from their own practice as the basis for discussion.

## 2.4 Data generation

A combination of secondary and primary data provided the material for my study. In acknowledgement of the importance of the context when studying workplace learning (Evans *et al.*, 2006), I collected secondary data in the form of national and institutional policy documents and academic journal articles.

These are summarised on table 1, below:

### 2.4.1 Sources of secondary data

**Table 1: Sources of secondary data**

National documents	Institutional documents	Academic journal articles
<p>National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997</p> <p>Quality Assurance Agency Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education. Section 6: Assessment of students- September 2006; Section 9: Work-based and placement learning- September 2007</p>	<p>Learning and Teaching Strategy, 2000</p> <p>Learning and teaching co-ordinator job description, 2003</p> <p>Revised Learning and Teaching Strategy, 2004</p> <p>Riverside University, Annual Report, 2006-2007</p> <p>Quality Enhancement Strategy, 2007</p>	<p>Key papers: Billett, 2001, 2001a, 2002, 2002a, 2002b, 2004; Engestrom, 2000, 2001, 2004; Eraut, 2000, 2004, 2007; Fuller and Unwin, 2003, 2004, 2004a, 2005; Fuller <i>et al.</i>, 2005; Hodkinson, 2004, 2005; Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2003, 2004a, 2004b; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Rainbird <i>et al.</i>, 2004; Saunders, 1995a, 1998, 2006; Trowler and Cooper, 2002; Wenger, 1998</p> <p>A full list of all academic journal articles drawn upon in this research can be found in the thesis references</p>

Analysis of national and institutional documents provided the information for the contextual frameworks discussed in chapter four. In addition, academic journal articles and research papers provided the theoretical and explanatory frameworks detailed in chapter three. Establishing the theoretical framework for the research, drawing upon both conceptual and empirical studies is normal in doctoral theses and fulfils several purposes. Initially a review of existing understanding can provide an overview within which to locate the current study and its contribution to the knowledge base. A review can also help formulate a research problem and can offer guidance in research design, highlighting techniques which may yield different types of data (Merriam, 1998). In my study, I began with a personal observation about the difficulty of understanding how members of a newly formed group were able to learn how to do the job in the absence of predecessors. An initial investigation of the literature on workplace learning opened up areas related to situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991), professional learning (Eraut, 2004, 2007) and expansive learning (Fuller and Unwin, 2003 ). Studies were largely of a qualitative nature and answered “how” and “why” questions rather than “what” and “how many”, providing guidance in the formulation of research questions. Obvious gaps in the literature related to studies of new working groups (or communities of practice) and also of groups working in highly complex workplaces such as higher education. With this in mind, I could begin to see how my work could offer a useful contribution to knowledge in this area. Whilst the thesis is presented in a logical order (in the manner of Bassey’s (1999) “structured reporting”), in reality I returned constantly to existing work in the

area. In particular, once I had begun to make sense of my findings, I revisited key articles with a view to developing detailed analysis and discussion.

In this thesis, reference to the academic literature and existing knowledge appears in the introduction as part of the scene setting and justification for the study. Chapter three focuses almost solely on the existing knowledge in the form of a synthesis and critique of what is already known about learning in the workplace. I then return to the literature in chapters five, six and seven, where discussion of my findings and conclusions are developed. In particular, reference will be made to my contribution to the existing knowledge.

#### **2.4.2 Sources of primary data**

In agreement with Mason (1996), I am proposing that primary research data were “generated” rather than “collected”, to convey rejection of the idea that data is simply out there waiting to be gathered and to confirm the role of the researcher as an active participant in the construction of knowledge. I was interested in the experiences, accounts, understandings, opinions and interpretations of a group of individuals who have been members of a group or community charged with instigating change in a turbulent environment. As there had been no written account of these experiences, one-to-one in-depth interviews would generate the most useful data in addressing my research questions. By collecting data in this way, it should be noted that I am working with perceptions of the respondents rather than facts. However, far from being a weakness in the data, I would argue that this is an unavoidable feature of all qualitative data. To make sense of our experiences, we always depend upon a series of prior concepts (Smith, 1998) which shape our interpretations.

Despite the lack of an objective reality, we can still develop new explanatory frameworks for social phenomena.

Whilst appropriate to the research, interviews are nonetheless acknowledged to have associated problems, in particular the danger of assuming information gathered during an interview can simply be extracted and quoted as though part of a statement in a law court (Wengraf, 2001). On the contrary, Wengraf suggests that if we need to use the data as evidence, then we need to be aware of assumptions and contextual issues that we as interviewers carry into the interview (and indeed, just as importantly those of the interviewees). These assumptions and prior experiences are also with us throughout the whole of the research process (Wengraf, 2001).

Depending on the level of direction the researcher wants to provide to the interviewee, different types of qualitative interviews are possible (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). An unstructured format would have a subject identified by the researcher, but few questions already developed. If a researcher is seeking more specific information, as in this research, a semi-structured approach is more appropriate, with pre-prepared questions used to guide the discussion. Both approaches would allow the content of the interview to alter to match the interviewee's own experiences and all qualitative interviews share some common characteristics, most importantly the need for understanding and insights (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). For this research, interviews were held at the participants' place of work, using a semi-structured interview guide to ensure all topics were covered. This did change over time, following reflection

after the first phase of interviews. A second guide was also developed for follow-up interviews.

Interviews started with a general discussion about the co-ordinator's background and how they had come to the role. They were then asked about their expectations and specifically about how they anticipated learning to do the job. Discussions then focussed on a typical week, with probing questions about how they worked out what to do for the tasks identified. Examples of when they felt they had made good progress and when it had been difficult to progress with a task were discussed in as much detail as possible. During the second phase of interviews, when I returned to four of the participants, further detailed discussions around the support provided, opportunities for feedback and professionalism provided additional data.

Interviews were digitally recorded (with one exception where an audio tape was used), transcribed, checked with interviewees for accuracy, and analysed. I stored the data as electronic audio files and as Word files of the transcripts. Within the transcripts, I inserted regular "time checks" so that I was able to quickly and efficiently retrieve quotations, to check for accuracy.

Mason (2002) suggests that "sampling" has connotations of statistical significance and probability that are not normally possible to achieve from qualitative research. Nonetheless, deciding who and how many people to interview should still be an important consideration. A researcher should aim for a sample which will enable a focus on specific issues, processes and

phenomena rather than obtain a “census” view. As Mason points out: “you will want your sample to give you access to data that will allow you to develop an empirically and theoretically grounded argument about something in particular” (Mason, 2002, p.121). The number of interviews is less important than the choice of participants and their ability to provide an overall sense of meaning to the research topic (Rubin and Rubin, 1995).

For this research, I interviewed eleven learning and teaching co-ordinators, chosen because of their ability to provide rich and interesting data about the learning process in a new professional group. In total, the available population for the research was fourteen. However, some co-ordinators had left the institution and others had been in post for a very brief period. None of those invited to take part in the study refused and the final sample included representatives from all faculties and included current and past co-ordinators, broken down as follows:

**Table 2: Summary of in-depth interviews**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Ex learning and teaching co-ordinators appointed in 2000, no longer in the role	4
Learning and teaching co-ordinator appointed in 2000, still in the role	1 (interviewed three times)
Learning and teaching co-ordinators appointed in 2003/4/5/6, still in the role	6 (of which three interviewed twice)

In addition, a member of the Academic Development Centre team to whom this group reports was interviewed. The inclusion of one “outsider” was not intended to add to the understanding of the learning of the group. Instead, this

participant was able to provide helpful information for the policy and institutional context sections of the thesis.

## **2.5 Data analysis and presentation**

Once interviews had been conducted and transcribed, the first stage of my analysis was to identify possible themes using categorical indexing (Mason, 1996). At this stage I read the transcripts “literally” (Mason, 1996), examining what was there. From my analysis of existing theory, themes were developed which provided the basis for the first stage of analysis. In this way, I was able to see the coverage of the interviews and I could retrieve issues which were not necessarily in the same sequence across all transcripts. By approaching analysis in this way, I was not following an inductive approach (Mason, 1996) where I have no prior theory upon which to draw. Instead, I was building an extension to existing theory, reviewing the data thematically until a clearer picture began to emerge. This “theory comes first” approach is an example of deductive reasoning, also referred to as the hypothetico-deductive method (Mason, 1996). Overall, this provided a good way “in” to the data and was good preparation for the second stage of analysis.

The second stage systematically applied tags or codes to the data. These tags could be much more detailed than the index categories derived for the initial review and enabled new themes to emerge from the data. Rubin and Rubin (1995) recommend then comparing material within (for variation) and across (for connections) the categories. My aim here was “to integrate themes and concepts into a theory that offers an accurate, detailed, yet subtle

interpretation of your research arena" (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, p.227). This two stage approach finally resulted in a series of grounded categories which I developed into a summary table which is presented in chapter five. Useful quotations were identified as the analysis took place. These were saved in a separate database, developed around themes to allow efficient retrieval for the writing up phase.

Case study design can emerge gradually and in response to the literature reviews, data collected and the analysis (Lloyd-Jones, 2003). Consequently, the decision about how to report findings was not made until data analysis had commenced. The task of analysing very different opinions within one group was always going to be difficult. Making sense of the diversity of perspectives and placing myself as researcher would inevitably lead to dilemmas. Some would argue that if interviews are held in a highly contingent way, within a specific context, is there any point in seeking common themes? (McCarthy *et al.*, 2003). My argument is that the group is still a social group and does function as a unit, sometimes with similarities and sometimes with divergencies. Analysing the multiple perspectives could be approached in two ways. The material could be used to build a valid picture of what appears to be happening (in this case the learning of the participants). On the other hand, the researcher could treat each account as indicative of the subjective reality of that individual and not attempt any search for a truth or reality behind the accounts given (McCarthy *et al.*, 2003).

In an attempt to capture the multiple realities and meanings at the research site, and to provide “thick descriptions”, I have presented the data in two ways. At the group level, I have drawn together the research and reported data by interpreting and analysing joint or divergent accounts amongst the group. I have evaluated the relative accounts of reality without accepting one “truth” (McCarthy *et al.*, 2003). Selected extracts (in the form of verbatim quotations) from interviews have been used to provide evidence for the themes developed. Quotations also serve to enliven the text, evoking the “voice” of the interviewees in a way which should improve the communicability of the thesis. In addition, alongside this analysis, I have used a selection of exhibits and vignettes to capture the multiple realities and meanings at this particular research site (Cousin, 2005) and to crystallise important aspects of the case (Bassey, 1999). As Miles and Huberman (1994) note, often in qualitative research we come across rich “pockets” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 81) of meaningful data which serve to illustrate a particular phenomenon. Amongst my data, I came across several such rich pockets which I have developed into vignettes, to provide a focussed portrayal of the learning of two of the interviewees. These are presented in chapter five.

Rejecting any claim to objectivity, I have not attempted to base my claims for validity on criteria developed for quantitative research. Instead I have based my claims on Rubin and Rubin’s (1995) framework featuring notions of transparency, consistency-coherence and communicability. I aimed to achieve transparency by clearly identifying the process of data collection and analysis. Although interviewees are not named, they are identified by a label (e.g.,

“Participant 1”). Transcripts provide a permanent record of the interviews, and these were submitted to the interviewees for accuracy checks. In keeping accurate records and accounts of how data were analysed, I also satisfy the requirement for auditability (Avis, 1995). I aimed to achieve consistency-coherence by reviewing inconsistencies in the data and revisiting some of the interviews to find explanations for contradictions in the data. Finally, communicability was achieved by drawing upon the experiences of interviewees, often presenting these as verbatim quotations. As Rubin and Rubin (1995) confirm, readers are more likely to give credibility to first hand experiences.

To summarise, interview findings will be presented in chapter five, using quotations from the transcripts to provide evidence, explain points more clearly and to evoke the voice of the participants. Findings will then be discussed and analysed in the light of explanatory frameworks derived from existing knowledge and theoretical frameworks in chapter six.

## **2.6 Ethical issues**

In case study approaches which involve qualitative research, the researcher is often the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Data is mediated through this instrument (as opposed to say a questionnaire) and the researcher can adapt techniques and tools (such as the interview guide) to changing circumstances (Merriam, 1998; Lloyd-Jones, 2003). In this thesis, as well as being the research instrument, I am also in the position of “insider” in that I am a member of the working group being studied. This raises several issues which will now be discussed.

Insider research issues are well documented in the nursing literature (Bonner and Tolhurst, 2002; Coghlan and Casey, 2001; Hart, 1996) and often aim to defend qualitative research against the arguably more objective scientific research which dominates medical research. Asselin (2003) defines insider research as when the researcher “conducts studies with populations, communities, and identity groups of which they are also members” (Asselin, 2003, p100). As a member of the working group of learning and teaching coordinators being studied in my thesis, this definition is wholly applicable to my situation.

Insider research issues arise for both the interviewer and the respondents. From the interviewer’s perspective, insider research can raise concerns over taken for granted understanding which may cause the researcher to overlook important data (Asselin, 2003; Bonner and Tolhurst, 2002). By assuming we already know and understand the subject under discussion, we may not probe in sufficient depth and therefore lose crucial information. Being too familiar with a situation may prevent us from recognising important patterns of practice. As a member of the community of practice being studied, there is also a danger of reflecting on one’s own experiences rather than those of the participants. However, Eraut (2004) notes in relation to studies of workplace learning, “performance therefore cannot be well understood by disengaged novices, trainers or researchers” (Eraut, 2004, p.259). Furthermore, Eraut (2004) also notes that relationships of high mutual trust that take time to develop can greatly facilitate data collection.

Ethical issues were also a potential problem. For example, what if I uncovered unprofessional practice? What if I were asked to keep remarks “off the record”? Would it be possible to ignore such remarks or would they stay with me and influence my thinking even if not transcribed? None of these issues in fact materialised, although some of the interviews did contain material that participants were keen to check before inclusion.

Whilst there are problems associated with insider research, it is also useful to identify some of the advantages. For example, access to respondents will generally be more straightforward, rapport may be easier to establish (Bonner and Tolhurst, 2002) and most of the structures and procedures under discussion will already be understood, requiring less explanation. Bonner and Tilehurst (2002) also claim that insider research can explore the process rather than the outcome of practice. As my thesis is concerned with understanding processes, this is particularly relevant. It is also important to note that these issues are not only present in insider research. Bassey (1999) notes that all research, including data collection, interpretation and dissemination reflects a “partisanship” (Bassey, 1999 p.90) deriving from the social identity and values of the researcher. Indeed the notion of the researcher as a neutral spectator in the social world has been widely dismissed (Smith and Hodkinson, 2002).

To overcome some of these issues, detachment, continual reflection and assuming minimal knowledge in an interview were vital. Continually checking

and reflecting on respondents' viewpoints can help avoid making assumptions during data collection (Bonner and Tolhurst, 2002). As part of my data collection plan, I asked respondents for an opportunity to return to them after the first interview to probe further into areas where I may have allowed assumptions to obscure the true picture.

Despite the issues raised, I would argue that being an insider forces a researcher to surface these assumptions in a way that an "outsider" may not. An outsider could assume that they are objective and yet they inevitably will have some prior knowledge which will affect their interpretations. Indeed, in educational research, the quality of interpretations is an important part of the research, a stance which inevitably draws as much upon prior understanding as it does on the actual research data. It is unlikely then, that even the most committed outsider will not bring some prior knowledge to the analysis and interpretation of findings (Flyvbjerg, 2001). In addition, from a practical point of view, an outsider may not have the opportunity to re-interview participants, even if assumptions were recognised. Overall, despite concerns about insider research, I would argue that acknowledgement of the position enabled me to deal with the issues in a way that an outsider may have overlooked, and ultimately contributed to academic rigour in the thesis.

Confidentiality was assured to all participants, and any quotations used in the subsequent write-up were not attributable to individuals. I also provided a full explanation to participants including why they were invited to be interviewed.

In this way, I hope to avoid deception about the nature of the study (Creswell, 1998).

Mason (1996) asks to what extent interviewing achieves ethical goals. She suggests that interviewees may be given more freedom and control in a semi-structured interview than a more structured approach. I certainly feel that a semi-structured interview enabled participants to broach issues not necessarily anticipated by me as the interviewer, thereby generating a fuller and fairer representation of their perspectives.

## **2.7 Summary**

To summarise, with a set of largely exploratory research questions, qualitative methodologies were felt to be most appropriate for this thesis. In order to cope with the complexity of the research site and turbulent policy context, I have used a case study approach drawing upon in-depth interviews, policy and institutional documents. This is an approach which is widely used and indeed supported in existing studies of workplace learning. By reporting both the joint accounts amongst the group and individual vignettes, I have been able to capture perceptions of the multiple realities and meanings at the research site. Whilst open to criticisms about the lack of generalisability of my findings, I am more concerned about gaining in-depth insight into a specific situation which I believe can contribute to understanding about learning in the workplace. Concerns about my position as an insider have been exposed and I have concluded that any disadvantages associated with my position are far

outweighed by the advantages (access to participants, ease of establishing a rapport, existing understanding of the procedures under discussion).

The next two chapters will provide an overview of the context of the research.

In chapter three, the theoretical context will be analysed, drawing upon academic literature relating to learning, practice, knowledge and expertise.

Chapter four will then outline the policy and institutional context.

## **Chapter Three: Learning in the workplace; what do we know already?**

In this chapter I will analyse existing conceptual and empirical studies on learning in the workplace, focussing specifically on learning, practice, knowledge and expertise. Reviewing existing literature helped me to develop both research questions and the methodology undertaken in my research. It was also useful for identifying gaps in the existing understanding which provided an opportunity to make a contribution to knowledge in this area.

### **3.1 Introduction**

Since Lave and Wenger's (1991) seminal work on communities of practice, social theories of learning based on action in the world and practice have come to centre stage in studies of workplace learning. Studies of learning have moved away from a focus on individuals (based on cognitive and behaviourist theories) to consideration of relationships, practices and the work context (Fuller and Unwin, 2004; Billett, 2002). Researchers are increasingly seeing the value of learning that takes place in the workplace, regarding it as just as important as learning gained through traditional educational institutions (Fuller and Unwin, 2005). Convincing evidence that learning as participation is gaining acceptance emerges from the Learning at Work Survey (LAWS) carried out by Research Surveys of Great Britain in 2004, where questions relating to activities which helped people to learn were included on the questionnaire (Felstead *et al.*, 2005). Activities reflected both learning as acquisition and learning as participation metaphors and results suggested that

activities closely associated with the workplace proved more helpful in learning how to do the job better (Felstead *et al.*, 2005). Saunders (2006) notes that out of a critique of competence approaches (which focussed on what people learned rather than how they learned) there has been a move to investigate how practice can result in learning and knowledge. Indeed, social practice narratives have been credited with moving the analytical focus away from education and work, to studying the ways in which learning and work practice are integrated (Saunders, 2006).

Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004a) suggest that workplace learning is so complex and diverse that no one theory can adequately deal with all aspects. They identify several types of learning, but stress the dangers of reductionism when looking at the complexities of workplace learning. Guile and Griffiths (2001) suggest that a lot of learning is about learning how to “negotiate” learning due to the multifaceted nature and uneven distribution of knowledge in workplaces.

Studies have explored workplaces as diverse as tailors, midwives, quartermasters, butchers and alcoholics (Lave and Wenger, 1991) insurance processors (Wenger, 1998) hair salon workers (Billett, 2004), apprentice workers in the steel industry (Fuller and Unwin, 2003) accountants, engineers and nurses (Eraut, 2007). As thinking about learning has changed, considerable attention has also been paid to the kinds of knowledge needed in the workplace. Traditional viewpoints of knowledge as discrete “bundles” of information acquired by learners do not have relevance in the workplace

where much of the learning is about how to do things or how to make sense of practices. As understandings of knowledge have evolved, we have also seen developments in understandings of expertise. Definitions of expertise based solely around acquiring technical knowledge are no longer sufficient to explain the types of expertise developed by some of the jobs and professions in the current workplace.

The chapter is divided into three broad sections. In the first, I will explore learning and practice. In the second, I will review thinking about knowledge, in particular in relation to emerging theories of learning. Finally, I will draw together ideas about how notions of expertise have also changed as understandings about learning and knowledge evolve.

### **3.2 Learning and Practice**

It is not possible to separate practice, and in particular work practice from learning. As individuals engage in practice they also engage in a process of changed understanding and knowledge construction (Billett, 2004), in other words, they are learning. It is this situated learning view that underpins seminal work by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) on learning in communities of practice.

The notion of communities of practice, based on a theory of learning as part of social activity, with an emphasis on the social and cultural processes that shape learning, was developed most famously by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998). Lave and Wenger (1991), define communities of practice as “a set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time, and in

relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.98). They go on to suggest that the community of practice involves participants sharing understanding about what they are doing within a particular activity system. For Lave and Wenger, 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 a community. For example, members would develop understanding of how language is used, why and how people do particular things, what members of the community like, dislike and how they interact with outsiders.

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. As Wenger (1998) points out in reviewing a claims processors team: “Working with others who share the same conditions is thus a central factor in defining the enterprise they engage in” (Wenger, 1998, p.45). Whilst this may be true of the Liberian tailors and Yucatan midwives studied by Lave and Wenger, it is less likely to be the case for newly formed communities where all members are novices, or working groups who represent different parts of an organisation.

Community of practice advocates have also been accused of overlooking the impact of individual experience and understanding on learning. There appears to be an implicit assumption that by focussing on the community and not the individual, contexts will be created which provide learning which can then

generate effective practice amongst the group. However, this view naively overlooks the unpredictable nature of individual experiences (Thorpe and Kubiak, 2005).

Literature on communities of practice does not always distinguish between communities which have been officially set up by an organisation with a brief to implement policies (e.g. learning and teaching co-ordinators) and those which have emerged as a result of the participants themselves (e.g. self-selecting group of lecturers who share similar research interests) with less obvious objectives. Another community could be a group of similar status staff who wish to offer each other support and share good practice (e.g. student support teams). In some of these groups, there would not necessarily be any desire to become a full participant in a community, yet the members are undoubtedly a community of practice, sharing stories and understanding.

Central to the learning in a community of practice is a flow of newcomers or novices who are gradually given more opportunities for responsibility and demanding tasks over time, with access to the artefacts and activities of that community. This “legitimate peripheral participation” ensures the reproduction of the community. Eventually, novices develop into experts, either “narrow” or “broad” depending on the extent of the tasks and interactions experienced. In Lave and Wenger’s (1991) words:

“Legitimate peripheral participation provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities,

artefacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. It concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.29).

As with much of the work on communities of practice, Lave and Wenger tend to focus on the positive benefits of learning in a community. However, Fuller *et al.* (2005) highlighted the complex and diverse nature of participation in the workplace. They pointed out that the notion of newcomers learning from old-timers is limited, and that in their studies, experienced workers are also learning from their engagement with novices (Fuller *et al.*, 2005). In challenging the notion that expertise is equated solely with status and experience in the workplace, they pointed out that novices bring a range of skills which are immediately useful in the workplace, in particular information technology skills and those acquired through education and part-time work. For Fuller *et al.*, this undermines the premise that communities of practice are unchanging. Evans *et al.* (2006) also note that to have expert and novice working together does not necessarily produce a learning process. It is also possible that situated learning involving legitimate peripheral participation can confine workers to a particular workplace, preventing an understanding of new perspectives and lessening opportunities for a critical stance towards the workplace (Evans *et al.*, 2006). In a similar vein, Bathmaker and Avis (2005) suggest that trainees in their study of teacher education felt marginalised from those communities of practice encountered on teaching placement. Rather than feeling encouraged to participate more fully, trainees found that the

culture of the communities of practice did not match their own views, leaving them feeling alienated.

Practice in this perspective, is central to learning and whilst it is not the only source of knowledge or knowledge resource, it is essentially of prime importance. Saunders (2006) notes many limitations to this narrative, most notably, the lack of consideration of the role of power in a community of practice. For example, the location of power in an organisation will influence the production and the legitimation of knowledge. In addition, as we have already seen (Thorpe and Kubiak, 2005) the extent to which participation can lead to learning is not totally in the hands of the “experts” and the allocation of legitimate peripheral participation. In defence of Lave and Wenger, Contu and Willmott (2003) contend that issues of power are implicit in Lave and Wenger’s work, but the way they have been interpreted (e.g. Brown and Duguid, 1996 ) has overlooked power issues in favour of a consensual, harmonious view of communities of practice (Contu and Willmott, 2003).

Activity theorists have also focussed on practice when looking at learning in the workplace. Taking a socio-historical perspective, learning is viewed as emerging from activity, not as a precursor to it. In an activity system, an individual (or an organisation) is the “subject” and the intention that motivates the activity is the “object” of the activity system. Tools and artefacts such as books, theories and guides are used by the subjects but are not fixed and will change as they are used by the subject. Activity theorists also include the rules and procedures involved in an activity, the community and the division of

labour in the system. Learning that takes place comes from the activity and is therefore not necessarily understood before the activity takes place. As a major proponent of activity theory, Engestrom (2001) has charted its development from the work of Vygotsky (1978, cited by Engestrom, 2001) and Leont'ev (1978, cited by Engestrom, 2001), noting the important contribution to theory of the introduction of a unit of analysis that overcame the split between individual and structure. Recent work on activity theory has focussed on groups of activity systems and the learning that takes place as subjects cross boundaries from one system to another. In this perspective, conflict is seen as a positive contribution leading to expansive learning. Whilst my work has not drawn wholly on activity theory, I have nonetheless borrowed aspects of the approach, notably the idea of focussing on the intention of a particular practice to group it with other practices. This will be explained in more detail when I present my findings in chapter five.

There can be no doubt that social theories of learning and the importance of practice are gaining ground, marking a shift away from a "standard" paradigm of learning to an "emerging" paradigm where learning is characterised by action in the world. At the heart of the difference between the two paradigms is the use of two seemingly polar metaphors for learning: acquisition and participation (Sfard, 1998; Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2004b). Hager (2004) coined the term "standard paradigm of learning" to capture learning where ideas are gradually acquired by the individual human mind. In this paradigm, there is "transparency" of learning, and knowledge consists of abstract ideas (concepts and propositions) that are independent of context. This type of

learning would be different to the learning of skills by apprentices, where what is learned is concrete and linked to the context in which the learning takes place. Hager (2004) argues that the standard paradigm of learning has influenced education and assessment, where learners are tested on universal, context-free knowledge. The mind as a container, with knowledge a series of objects filling up those containers has influenced all levels of formal education as well as workplace learning.

This view of “learning as product” (Hager, 2004a p.5) is based on assumptions of stability (i.e., products of learning are relatively stable over time and can be recorded in texts for transmission and measured by examination) and replicability (i.e., the learning of individual learners can be virtually identical and levels can be “attained”). These assumptions can create problems when reviewing workplace learning, implying for example that a learner is someone who has yet to acquire a set of items to be able to carry out the work. When applied to lifelong learning, the implication is that learners accumulate endless discrete pieces of learning. Hager (2004a) suggests that instead of this acquisition of content, we would be better to view learning as the “gradual clearing of a fog in a landscape” (Hager, 2004a, p.8). Although this does offer an improvement in understanding the learning process, it does not take account of the occasions when a learner experiences a sudden “dawning”, when several aspects of learning come together in a clear way (the “aha” moment!) before the “fog” descends again.

In the “emerging paradigm of learning”, learning is characterised as action in the world. As a result of learning, both learners and their environment are changed. The main outcome in this emerging paradigm is not the changed “cleverness” of the learner, but the creation of a new set of relations in an environment. Learning in this way is contextual, as it continually alters the context in which it occurs. However, assuming that learning always alters the context and the existing sets of relations in a uniform way is misguided. It assumes that learners always have access to the means of distribution of the new knowledge, and that they are motivated to use their new understandings. For example, a lecturer in higher education may have been involved in a project which demonstrated the benefits of incorporating interactive teaching methods into the classroom. However, they may decide not to “spread the word” knowing that colleagues would not approve, or may feel that the initial time investment is simply not worth the effort. Others in a similar situation may strive to encourage colleagues to develop similar approaches. Undoubtedly the context is altered, but it will not be in a uniform way across all circumstances and factors such as access to the means of distribution and motivation will affect the extent to which the context is altered.

In all of these developments, learning is viewed as a process, not a product, and a process which changes both the learner and the environment of which the learner is a part. This process incorporates social, cultural and political dimensions (Hager, 2004a). Gherardi *et al.* (1998) also argued against a view of learning as knowledge acquisition and indeed as an individual activity. For them, learning is rooted in everyday activities where groups participate and

contribute to a world which is socially and culturally structured: “learning takes place among and through other people” (Gherardi *et al.*, 1998, p.274). Also drawing upon social practice theory, Knight and Trowler (2001) suggest learning is best understood by identifying what it is not, for example, “individual, private, cumulative, permanent, context-independent, acquired by explicit transmission, and predominantly rational” (Knight and Trowler, 2001, p51).

We have already established that access to practice is crucial for learning in the workplace. Indeed, social practice theorists generally stress that the acquisition of new knowledge and skills can be highly dependent upon opportunities for legitimate peripheral participation in particular contexts (Knight and Trowler, 2001 p.53). Understanding what opportunities there are for practice and understanding the factors that influence those opportunities, therefore, becomes important in order to understand learning in the workplace. In addition, as individuals will view opportunities differently, an understanding of how and why individuals access practice is also crucial to understanding learning in the workplace. In acknowledgement of this, several authors discuss the balance between individual agency and structure when reviewing learning in the workplace, although some caution against prioritising one over the other (Trowler and Knight, 1999). For example, Fuller and Unwin (2005) suggest that it is important to “recognise the importance of structure in shaping the character and availability of workplace learning opportunities, whilst at the same time viewing individuals as active agents who can elect the extent to which they engage in the situations open to them” (Fuller and Unwin,

2005 p.26). Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2003) also suggest we need to look at individuals' dispositions, their values and identities, as well as the culture and ethos of the department in which they work, along with the wider social and politically influenced context. Other authors have also focussed on individuals' dispositions (Evans *et al.*, 2006) drawing attention to the prior experiences of individuals which can shape their views of the world. Drawing on work by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), Evans *et al.* (2006) explain that dispositions are "largely tacit, but orientate our thoughts and actions in any situation. Like identity, dispositions are grounded in the whole embodied person... and are a partial reflection the social structures we inhabit... they are deeply established and difficult to change... however they are not fixed and our lives are not determined by them" (Evans *et al.*, 2006, p.109). As dispositions will vary from individual to individual, it follows that different learners will perceive the same opportunities in different ways (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000). If we accept this, we identify a flaw in communities of practice theory, where all individuals appear to be treated as the same, or at best, reduced to a cipher such as Ariel, the representative of a group of claims processors (Wenger, 1998). Indeed, in much of the literature on learning in the workplace, individuals are often acknowledged, but the detail relating to their particular perspectives is often overlooked (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2003).

Hodkinson (2005) sees a problem with attempting to define learning according to the individual and the social. In keeping with other authors who critique the "standard paradigm" view of learning (Hager, 2004), Hodkinson notes that learners are always an integral part of the social and organisational context in

which they work and learn (Hodkinson, 2005). In other words, learners are always learning in a particular cultural setting (classroom or workplace) where the “way we do things” is socially constructed and constantly changing. In addition, if we think about individual learners as having lives beyond the educational or learning context, we can see that “the ways in which one individual may be part of a learning context may be very different from the ways in which another person is part of even the same learning context” (Hodkinson, 2005, p.112).

Billett (2002) places importance on the agency of individuals, arguing that learning is not simply socialisation determined by historical, cultural and situational factors. He sees “affordances” (interpreted as opportunities) as available to individuals, but the agency of the individual is what determines how they engage in work practice. However, Billett also identifies that “the kind of workplace activities that individuals are able to engage in and their access to guidance are central to their learning” (Billett, 2002, p.461). Thorpe and Kubiak (2005) add support to the notion that neither learner nor context and structure should be accorded privileged status over the other. For example, different workplace dynamics can integrate with individual agency factors to create a wide variety of very different sets of learning conditions.

A focus on practice in the workplace has also led to the development of new ways of conceptualising learning, with terms such as “formal” and “informal” being used to characterise the different types of workplace learning. Informal learning is often regarded as localised and non-transferable (Hodkinson and

Hodkinson, 2004a) and of a collaborative nature (Williams, 2003). Eraut's view on informal learning in the workplace emerges from on-going research into "what is being learned, how is it being learned and what are the factors that influence the level and direction of the learning effort?" (Eraut, 2004, p.247). Arguing that professional learning (along with managerial and technical learning) is usually complex, involving simultaneous use of several different types of knowledge and skills, Eraut develops a typology of informal learning, noting that informal learning can be easily overlooked in an organisation because the dominant policy discourse focuses on problems that are well-defined and which have ready solutions, in other words which are "susceptible to formal, standardised training" (Eraut, 2004, p.271). Knight *et al.* (2006) also noted that non-formal and social learning has dominated the professional formation of teachers in higher education and much of the learning is derived from on-the-job learning and conversations with others.

However, in a critique of the discourse of "formal" and "informal", Billett (2002a) suggests that the assumptions implicit in the terms formal and informal restrict how workplace learning is conceptualised and discussed, and impact negatively on the development of a workplace pedagogy. Reflecting the debate on acquisition versus participation in learning, Billett considers the description of work place learning as informal as "negative, inaccurate and ill-focussed" (Billett, 2002a, p.58). As an alternative to informal and formal, Billett proposes that workplaces and educational settings are simply different types of social practice in which learning occurs through participation. Both are

concerned with the continuity of practice and both are constituted historically, culturally and situationally.

Hodkinson (2005) offers definitions of each: “formal learning is planned, teacher-dominated, assessed and takes place in educational institutions, where learning is the prime official objective of activity.” (Hodkinson, 2005 p.114). Informal learning is “unplanned, incidental, unassessed, and uncontrolled by a teacher and takes place in everyday life, where learning is not the primary purpose of the activities in which we engage.” (Hodkinson, 2005 p.114). From these definitions, we can see that we learn informally through participation in day to day activities. Hodkinson (2005) has issue with these definitions, firstly because however defined, informal learning is always present in educational institutions, for example, students learn how to fit in (or not), how to get by, how to complete assessments etc. One way of taking the debate further would be to argue that all learning in educational institutions includes an interrelationship between formal and informal learning. However, work by Colley *et al.* (2003a) found that there was very little agreement on how to define boundaries around formal and informal learning. They claim that attempts to classify learning as one or the other are merely constructions of writers, researchers and practitioners (Colley *et al.*, 2003a). They concluded that formality and informality should be viewed as attributes of learning (Colley *et al.*, 2003a,) and that all learning combines attributes rather than being defined as either informal or formal. Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004a) also support finding ways of understanding and theorising workplace learning which avoid denigrating either approach.

Knight *et al.* (2006) note the importance of non-formal learning, suggesting that it is “common, important and lifelong” (Knight *et al.*, 2006 p.322). Their research suggested that learning to teach in higher education was largely through “simply doing the job of teaching in HE” (Knight *et al.*, 2006 p.323) but also contributing were participants’ own experiences of having been taught in higher education and workshops, conferences and conversations with colleagues. Formal provision was not however rejected; for taking on a specific role, formal methods were useful, whereas for general formation as a teacher, social learning and practice were more important. Finally, the importance of “hybrid spaces” such as cafes, lifts to work, where participants are both working and not working, has been identified (Solomon *et al.*, 2006) for the development of informal learning in the workplace. In such places, there are fewer rules and regulations than elsewhere. In agreement with Billett (2002a), Solomon *et al.* (2006) noted the misleading nature of the terminology of informal, formal and non-formal.

As practice becomes more important for learning in the workplace, we also see the growing recognition of the support needed for learners, with different learning contexts requiring different levels of support. Saunders (1995a) recognises the quick, easy, face-to-face support appropriate in the “immediate” learning context but also the intermediate levels of support such as reference to reports, site visits and access to experts, (possibly as part of a project) more appropriate for the project context. Learning in a project context comes from a combination of experiential, procedural and conceptual

knowledge and solutions are not expected as rapidly as in immediate context. A validated context would include professional learning and the acquisition of qualifications via courses. Finally, an organic context would involve shared conversations and ideas amongst members of a dispersed group (Saunders, 1995a).

Support in the form of guidance also features in work by Billett (2001a) who sees three contributors to learning vocational practice at work: engagement in every day work tasks, direct guidance of co-workers and indirect guidance provided by the workplace itself. However, everyday work experience alone will not provide the robust learning needed to be able to transfer vocational knowledge to other situations; for this, workplace experiences need to be structured and guided. With this in mind, Billett proposes a workplace curriculum with three levels of guided learning: intentional organising of access to guidance, with monitoring along the way; the use of guided learning strategies (modelling, coaching etc) by more experienced co-workers and intentionally extending individuals' knowledge to be transferable. The focus in these proposals is very much on the planned and intentional support, driven by more experienced managers and colleagues.

A further aspect of support is feedback. The importance of feedback for student learning is well documented in the educational literature (Taras, 2002; Laurillard, 2002; Higgins *et al.*, 2002). However, it features explicitly much less often in the workplace learning literature. Eraut (2004) identifies the importance of giving and receiving feedback for most learning processes.

Feedback could be at short-term task-specific level or longer term, more strategic level. The theme continues in work undertaken by the Early Career Learning at Work (LiNEA) project. Following research into mid-career learning (Eraut *et al.*, 2000), the LiNEA project developed a framework to highlight the significant factors for the learning of early career professionals. A triangular model featuring challenge and value of the work, confidence and commitment, and feedback and support was developed and applied to three professional environments: accountancy, nursing and engineering. In this study, it was identified that confidence is required if workers are to be proactive in seeking learning opportunities (Eraut, 2007). Confidence can be the result of taking on and meeting challenges, and in turn depends upon the level of support offered. For Eraut (2007) this results in a triangular relationship between challenge, support and confidence. In Eraut's work, confidence depends upon the context used and could relate to capability to perform specific tasks, or it could refer to confidence in the level of support offered by working colleagues (Eraut, 2007).

This project also uncovered the importance of the level of challenge for learning and the development of confidence. Whilst some groups such as newly-qualified nurses felt over-challenged by increasing levels of responsibility, others, such as some of the engineers in the study, felt under-challenged. Overall, Eraut's work concluded that the majority of workers' learning occurs in the workplace (Eraut, 2007). Formal learning contributes when relevant and well-timed, but needs further workplace learning before used to best effect (Eraut, 2007). Eraut (2007) suggests national policies need

to take account of workplace learning. For learning, retention and commitment, the opportunity to gain feedback is crucial, providing important support. Workplace learning can be enhanced by increasing opportunities for working alongside others in teams. Being over-challenged and under-challenged is detrimental to workplace learning. Furthermore, managers should provide a culture of mutual support and not provide it all themselves, implying some form of distributed leadership (Eraut, 2007). This needs to be given more priority in management development programmes. In terms of the knowledge required, all parties (novices, mentors and managers) need greater awareness of the different ways people learn in the workplace; need to be able to discuss learning needs and progress; need to recognise and deal with factors that enhance or hinder learning (Eraut, 2007).

In summary, studies of workplace learning focus strongly on the links between practice and learning, emphasising social learning and reflecting the growing paradigm of learning as a process (from participation) rather than learning as a product (based on acquisition). With an emphasis on participation, the opportunities for practice and support for learning have received considerable attention. The balance between organisational and individual factors affecting participation has also been addressed, with a growing view that both merit attention in studies of learning in the workplace.

### **3.3 Knowledge**

As our understanding of learning increasingly encompasses workplace learning as well as learning in formal institutions, and as the emphasis on participation as a way of learning gains ground, we also see a shift in the

types of knowledge developed and required for learners. In traditional learning institutions, such as schools and colleges, conceptual, context free knowledge or propositional knowledge is paramount, with learners expected to “acquire” and store discrete bundles of knowledge for reproduction (often through examination) at a later stage. Note however, that even in schools pupils are expected to know how the system works, how to submit work, how to behave, often tacit knowledge which is not “conceptual” and context free. In this section, I will explore current thinking about knowledge.

Two broad understandings of knowledge underpin much of the literature on knowledge. On the one hand, propositional knowledge consists of concepts and theories which are claimed to be timeless and context free. On the other hand, procedural knowledge would encompass understanding of how things work. The difference could also be conveyed as “knowledge that” and “knowledge about” (Blackler, 1995). This “troubling dualism” (Hodkinson, 2005, p110) can hinder understanding of learning; nonetheless, many authors have offered different explanations of types of knowledge which broadly fit one or other of these understandings. This dualism can be traced back to Durkheim, who, through focus on the different types of knowledge (rather than the similarities) developed a distinction between the *sacred* and the *profane* orders of meaning that he uncovered through his work with primitive societies (Durkheim 1961). The profane refers to knowledge of the everyday world: practical, immediate and specific, arguably similar to procedural knowledge. Sacred knowledge, on the other hand, was conceptual and invented, not tied to a particular context, and arguably similar to propositional knowledge.

Although this sacred knowledge was originally related to religion, it came to embrace all other types of conceptual knowledge in the fields of science, philosophy and mathematics. For Durkheim, neither type of knowledge is superior to the other as a reliance on theory alone would make everyday living very difficult. Equally, reliance only everyday knowledge would greatly restrict understanding of the world (Young, 2003).

However, often in western approaches, propositional knowledge, related to the mind, is often held to be superior to other forms of knowledge (Hodkinson, 2005; Blackler, 1995). Blackler (1995) refers to this type of knowledge as embrained, ie knowledge that is dependent on conceptual skills and conceptual abilities. Encoded knowledge is information conveyed by signs and symbols e.g. books, manuals which would be a way of storing such embrained knowledge (Blackler, 1995).

The role of propositional knowledge is virtually overlooked in Lave and Wenger's (1991) work on communities of practice. Other authors have a less clear-cut position. Hager (2004) for example, does not reject propositional knowledge, but sees it as an important sub-component of a mix that underpins judgment. What is rejected is the notion that propositions are timeless and context free. By contributing to the making of judgments, propositions are immersed in the social world and therefore lose their "classical, transcendental status" (Hager, 2004, p.249). Hodkinson (2005) also concludes that the dualism of mind and body has ceased to be useful when trying to understand learning, pointing out that even disciplines as "pure" and objective as

mathematics rely on artefacts such as books, paper, pens and calculators, leading to a view that learning is embodied.

Other ways of classifying knowledge have also emerged. Eraut (2004) for example, discusses the notion of “personal knowledge” in his work on informal learning in the workplace. The things that people bring to a situation that enable them to think, interact and perform would fit into this category of knowledge. Also included would be know-how regarding skills and practices, everyday knowledge of people and situations and memories of episodes and events. In Eraut’s view, this knowledge is usually holistic and ready for action (Eraut, 2004). Cultural knowledge is also identified by Eraut (2004), much of which is acquired informally through participation in social activities. As much of it is taken for granted, people are often unaware of it, hence it does not tend to be amenable to codification. Skills can be a form of cultural knowledge and a form of personal knowledge. Blackler’s version of personal knowledge is embodied knowledge which can be explained as “knowledge how...”. It tends to be action oriented, only partly explicit, rooted in contexts and involves “practical thinking”. Saunders (1998) notes its similarity to “the way we do things round here” i.e. highly context bound.

Blackler also identifies encultured knowledge or the process of achieving shared understandings; this knowledge is socially constructed and open to negotiation. An example would be “shared stories” i.e. the discourses of communities of practice (Saunders, 1998). Finally, Blackler notes that embedded knowledge is knowledge which resides in systemic routines;

relationships and material resources would be significant. It is analysable in systems terms e.g. in relationships between technologies, roles, formal procedures and emergent routines.

Young (2004) supports a view of knowledge as inescapably social in its origin. For Young, even the basic categories and concepts are social in origin in that all knowledge is the outcome of social practices. Within this view, no knowledge can claim a privileged status over other types of knowledge and none can claim to be objective. Even discipline based (propositional) knowledge is simply someone's knowledge, in the same way as on-the-job procedural knowledge.

In social practice theory, "knowing" is linked with activities undertaken within a specific context and culture i.e. is "contexted and contingent" (Knight and Trowler, 2001, p.51), therefore knowledge becomes "distributed" rather than individualised i.e. cognition is spread over mind, body, activity and culturally organised settings" (Knight and Trowler, 2001, p.51). Instead of being in our head, knowledgeability and expertise are linked to contextual elements such as relationships and technologies (Knight and Trowler, 2001).

Understanding the tacit knowledge held by workers can be problematic. Often, knowledge is not even recognised as such, hence would be difficult to research. In the view of learning as product (Hager, 2004a), there is no place for tacit knowledge. Knowledge is viewed as a discrete series of objects which can be contained in an individual's mind. However, the emerging view of

learning, with a focus on the process of an individual's ability to grow and constantly adjust to the environment, accounts well for tacit knowledge (Hager, 2004a). Trowler and Cooper (2002) and Trowler (2005) developed an analytical tool to help uncover some of the tacit knowledge and practice involved in university departments or "Teaching and Learning Regimes". By analysing nine cultural components or "moments" of the social process, we can gain insight and understanding of some of the tacit knowledge and practice present in Higher Education departments, tacit practices which can help explain departmental variations (Anderson, 2005a).

Viewing knowledge as a set of discrete bundles also presents a problem when looking at the development of new knowledge (Chaiklen and Lave, 1993). If we view knowledge as "as a collection of real entities, located in heads" (Chaiklin and Lave, 1993, p.12), how do we gain or invent new knowledge? If we are simply transmitting knowledge, are we also implying a uniformity of knowledge? This view overlooks the contributions of individuals, multiple activities and different goals that affect what constitutes knowing on a given occasion. The implication is that humans engage in "the reproduction of given knowledge rather than in the production of knowledgeability as a flexible process of engagement with the world" (Chaiklin and Lave, 1993, p.13).

As understandings of knowledge change, so do our understandings of knowledge resources. Rather than only books, papers any collections of propositional knowledge, we see a whole range of additional resources drawn upon. For example, practice in current workplace learning narratives is a

source of knowledge resources but is also part of a “complex dynamic” (Saunders, 2006, p.16) in which members of a community of practice use the knowledge resources in place, but then also create and add to those knowledge resources. Other resources include “bridging tools” or tools of reference that help develop a framework for future actions. For example, evaluation has been identified by Bonamy *et al.* (2001) as a support for learning in the workplace in the form of a “bridging tool”. In complex environments, where stability is difficult to establish, evaluation can provide resources for reflection which can in turn provide “provisional stabilities”, enabling learners to make sense of changing environments.

In summary, there is a strong view, apparent from the literature that knowledge is multifaceted (Blackler, 1995) with no one type of knowledge as superior to another. Knowledge has developed from being a discrete bundle of facts to distributed understanding of systems, cultures and ways of doing things, which is highly context bound.

### **3.4 Expertise**

In the next section I will discuss how notions of expertise have also changed as understandings about learning and knowledge evolve.

Early studies of expertise grew largely from research in health and social care environments. Seminal work by Benner (1984) and later Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) developed different levels of expertise. Dreyfus and Dreyfus identified five levels: Novice, Advanced Beginner, Competent, Proficient and Expert. Distinguishing features of experts include a superior organisation of relevant

knowledge in order to solve problems and in the later stages of Dreyfus and Dreyfus' model, deliberation would be gradually replaced by intuitive forms of cognition. The notion of developing tacit knowledge is important to these models.

Criticisms of studies of expertise include the observation that expertise is looked at either from an experiential approach or from a cognitive approach, with no attempt to integrate the two (Yielder, 2004). In an attempt to overcome this weakness, Yielder developed a model based around five themes: knowledge base, cognitive processes, internal integrative processes, interpersonal relationships and professional practice. Her research identified that a critical feature of expertise is the way in which professionals are constantly making sense or meanings so that they can meet and manage change. For Yielder, expertise is reliant on a critically reflective approach. She also places great emphasis on the synergy that occurs in expert practice, suggesting that the inter-relationships of skills, knowledge, cognitive processes, experience, attitudes and personality transform practice into an "art". Her proposed model stresses the importance of integrating the five themes and warns against the dangers of reductionism if attempts are made to break the model down into its component parts.

In a similar vein, Eraut (2005) also notes the over-emphasis on the cognitive aspects of expertise, claiming too much attention has been paid to mental processes rather than concrete activities occurring within socio-cultural contexts. Cognitive models overlook the intra and inter-personal relationships

that emerge from engagement in practice (Yielder, 2004). Eraut advocates a focus on “networked expertise” where individuals develop knowledge and skills in relation to others enabling them to take advantage of each others’ strengths and weaknesses. By moving amongst different communities, individuals need to learn to adjust their activities and find opportunities to develop and utilise their own expertise (Eraut, 2005). Work by Engestrom (2004) develops this further and is discussed below. Gherardi *et al.* (1998) see expert knowledge as a mixture of knowing and knowing-how, learning and forgetting. Blackler (1995) sees a distinction between specialist expertise and the skills of an established profession with a growing importance for social skills and developing client relationships and emphasis on “knowing about” rather than “knowledge that...”.

Billett’s view of expertise is founded upon the assertion that experts are “individuals from whom others seek advice about how to approach a difficult task” (Billett, 2001, p.43). In his view, expertise is relational i.e. to a particular workplace; expertise is embedded with meaning about practice; expertise requires competence in a community’s discourse (more than in technical skills); expertise is reciprocal i.e. shaping and being shaped by the community of practice; expertise requires pertinence in the appropriateness of problem solutions. In summary, these characteristics emphasise the situatedness of vocational expertise. Because a person could be expert in one workplace and a novice in another, Billett’s view is that studies of requirements for work can only be understood in terms of the actual work practice.

For Lave and Wenger (1991), experts or “old-timers” are those full participants of a sociocultural practice: a community of practice, those who have the knowledgeable skills, but more importantly have gone through the social process of becoming a full participant. Fuller and Unwin (2004a) use various notions of expertise to characterise the different approaches to workforce development. For example, an expansive approach would have a multi-dimensional view of expertise, whereas a restrictive approach would have a uni-dimensional, top-down view of expertise. An expansive view of expertise would involve the “creation of environments which allow for substantial horizontal, cross-boundary activity, dialogue and problem-solving” (Fuller and Unwin, 2004a, p136) This is very different to the restrictive approach which suggests that “experts” hold the knowledge which they can transfer (if they choose) to “novices”.

As new types of organisations emerge within a climate of social, economic and technological change, we also see a need for a new approach to the construction and distribution of expertise: a collaborative and transformative approach (Engestrom, 2004). Engestrom (2004) proposes that there is a “new generation” of expertise based on workers’ capacity to deal with constantly changing challenges by boundary crossing, negotiation, and improvisation. With this change, Engestrom suggests we also need to rethink what we mean by learning. Engestrom charts “expertise” from the transmission of book knowledge, through legitimate peripheral participation, to progressive problem solving and finally to the more recent process of expertise defined as “shaping radical transformations”. Engestrom’s notion of “negotiated knotworking” has

been developed to explain the new form of expert work activity. Knotworking is characterised by a perpetual linking and distancing of separate activity systems, much like the tying, untying and retying of a series of threads. In Engestrom's words "The notion of knot refers to rapidly pulsating, distributed and partially improvised orchestration of collaborative performance between otherwise loosely connected actors and activity systems" (Engestrom, 2000 p. 972) This unstable "knot" rather than individuals or institutions should be the focus of analysis.

### **3.5 Summary**

A review of current theory on learning in the workplace has confirmed the growing importance of social learning to research in this area. This is based on a view of learning which moves from a "traditional" paradigm where learning is seen as product to an emerging paradigm, with learning as a process. Although early social practice theorists overlooked the role of the individual (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), more recent work has highlighted that individual agency cannot be totally overlooked when developing understanding of workplace learning (Billett, 2002; Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2003). Later work also attempted to explore the organisational aspects of workplace learning often overlooked in a situated approach, and Fuller and Unwin (2003) drew attention to the importance of the learning environment developing conceptions of expansive and restrictive learning environments. Eraut (2004, 2007) has most successfully combined social theories of learning with a cognitive viewpoint in several studies of early and mid career professional learning. A focus on knowledge resources for learning in the workplace in the emerging paradigm has also revealed the importance

of looking beyond traditional resources such as books and papers to practice as a source of knowledge resources.

This review of what we know already suggests that learning in the workplace is incomplete without a focus on practice. The two are so heavily integrated that research which overlooked the everyday activities of members of a working group would be incomplete. The review has also confirmed the validity of the case study approach in studies of workplace learning. Finally, the review of current literature has revealed a lack of studies focussing specifically on newly formed communities of practice, confirming that my thesis can make a realistic contribution to understanding of this subject.

I will return to ideas and concepts presented in this overview of learning, practice, knowledge and expertise in the workplace in chapters five and six, when I discuss my own findings about learning in a new community of practice at Riverside University. I will now explain the context of the current study.

## **Chapter Four: The context of the research**

In this chapter, I will outline the national and institutional context of the research. Beginning with an overview of Higher Education in the UK and the policy context, I will chart the development of Academic Development , including a discussion of the notion of professionalism for those working in the field. I will also review the institutional context, and examine the community of practice of learning and teaching co-ordinators who are the subject of this study.

### **4.1 Higher education in the UK**

The context for this thesis is Higher Education in the UK, a sector characterised by rapid change over the last twenty five years. Large increases in student numbers, increasing focus on independent study, decreasing class contact time, and an acknowledgement of students' need to work part-time (Quigley, 1998), increasing diversity of products and services and a decline in the per student funding levels (Mador, 2004) are familiar features of the university landscape. Widening participation initiatives have resulted in a growing diversity in the student population and institutions are obliged to seek economies of scale as well as new sources of funding. Increasing dependence on the use of information technology, growth in knowledge, an increasing demand for higher education and changes in student requirements have also been identified as characteristics of this "increasingly crowded market place with new providers emerging to compete with existing universities and colleges" (Middlehurst, 2000, p.101). Indeed, the

contemporary environment of higher education has been characterised as “complex, rapidly changing and uncertain” (Bonamy *et al.*, 2001, p.302).

Within this ever-changing environment, universities have been identified as having a plurality of communities each with their own traditions of management and their own cultures operating simultaneously (Mador, 2004). Practice in one subject area and another vary massively across higher education institutions and their departments (Knight *et al.* 2006, p.336). Neumann *et al.* (2002) note the differences between hard and soft, applied and pure fields of study. Alvesson (2002) notes the multi cultural configurations present in contemporary universities and Trowler and Cooper (2002) have developed the analytical tool of Teaching and Learning Regimes to help understand the differences across departments within an institution. Indeed, despite the disbandment of the Institute of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHE) and its replacement with the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in 2003, the subject centred Learning and Teaching Support Networks (LTSN) were nonetheless retained, suggesting that knowledge regarding pedagogic practice is culturally related and difficult to standardise across complex institutions.

## **4.2 The policy context**

As Evans *et al.* (2006) confirm: “an understanding of the impact of government policies is essential for a contextualised analysis of workplace learning” (Evans *et al.*, 2006, p.116). The turbulent environment outlined above is largely the result of an ever-changing policy context, which dates back to 1997, when the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE)

developed a long-term national strategy for higher education in the UK. Commonly referred to as the “Dearing Report”, the aim was to encourage greater recognition for teaching within higher education, especially as the student body was becoming more diverse. Strategies arising from the report aimed for a more consistent approach to higher education across all institutions, whilst still allowing innovation at a local level (Quigley, 1998). Several initiatives were developed which have since shaped learning, teaching and research in UK universities. One change was the establishment of The Learning and Teaching Standing Committee of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), which had a remit to advise the funding council on developing a learning and teaching strategy, along with appropriate funding mechanisms. Six key issues were identified:

- Raising the profile of learning and teaching in higher education
- Enhancing public confidence in the quality of learning and teaching in higher education
- Enhancing the quality of learning and teaching
- Responding to global competition
- Promoting the efficient and effective use of resources
- Encouraging research to support learning and teaching in higher education

(Higher Education Funding Council for England, 1998)

Overall, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (1998) proposed a new integrated approach to funding improvements in teaching quality by

introducing the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF). This would provide funding at institutional level to support the implementation of learning, teaching and assessment strategies. It was in line with this movement that the first explicit Riverside University Learning and Teaching Strategy was developed in 1999/2000.

At national subject level, funding was used to develop twenty four Learning and Teaching Support Networks (LTSN). A third, individual level of funding was available in the form of the National teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS) in which three-year fellowships worth £50,000 were awarded to higher education teachers (Trowler *et al.*, 2005).

Other initiatives resulting from the Dearing Report include the creation of The Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education whose aim was to guide accredited programmes of study for university teachers and provide recognition for various levels of expertise (this became the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education in 2002).

In 2003, the Department for Education and Skills published a white paper: "The future of higher education" suggesting some changes in learning and teaching. Funding switched from support for institutional learning and teaching strategies to funds directed towards Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs). Objectives for CETLs included a focus on diversity of learning, innovation, employability, collaboration and dissemination of good practice. The white paper also resulted in the creation of the Higher Education

Academy, a body which was to include the Learning and Teaching Support Networks along with the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. Responsibilities were to include establishing new standards of accreditation for higher education teachers and involvement in the training of Quality Assurance Agency subject assessors and auditors (Trowler *et al.*, 2005).

Against this backdrop of change in national policy, universities responded in a variety of ways. Research amongst higher education institutions confirms that initiatives have resulted in change. By June 2000, every English institution had a learning and teaching strategy in place (Gibbs, 2001). Gibbs was particularly encouraged to discover that implementation plans, change mechanisms and monitoring procedures were becoming more likely to appear as part of a learning and teaching strategy than even two years previously. To complement Gibbs' overview, a number of studies have reviewed the detailed implementation of learning and teaching strategies (e.g. Clegg, 2003).

Specific issues highlighted in the Dearing report came onto the agendas of most higher education institutions, notably the introduction of programme specifications for all courses and the idea of Progress Files (a personal record along with a detailed transcript) which led to emphasis on personal development planning across the sector (Quigley, 1998). We will see in later chapters how this impacted upon the work undertaken by the learning and teaching co-ordinators at Riverside University.

### **4.3 Academic Development**

Following such a focus on higher education policy, the growth in academic development across the sector was inevitable. The notion of academic development is not entirely clear, although attempts have been made to define it. Some of the more accepted aspects include improvement of teaching and assessment practices, professional development of staff, policy development and student learning development (Gosling, 2001), but there have been claims that it is situated on the “fringes” of “serious” academic activity (Harland and Staniforth, 2003, p.33). Noting a background of tension and increasing complexity, Lee and McWilliam (2008) suggest that academic development is a field constantly struggling with self-definition. As the work of academic developers often crosses boundaries and deals with competing agendas, they can often feel confused and lacking a clear role. It is hardly surprising therefore, that Lee and McWilliams (2008) also note the increasing number of books and journal articles devoted to describing, classifying and categorising the field in various contexts. Land (2004) for example, offered a way of classifying educational developers into a series of orientations (or variations in practice) towards educational development. Twelve orientations were identified following in-depth interviews with developers themselves. From a managerial orientation focusing on strategic leadership and increasing levels of professionalism to a reflective practitioner orientation, the study concludes that educational development appears to be a fragmented community, which, whilst growing in influence, is still vulnerable and marginal (Land, 2004).

Noting that there is no canonical view of how to organise academic development, (is it an administrative function or located in an academic faculty?), and, reflecting on their experiences as academic developers, Harland and Staniforth (2003) propose that the profession of academic development should aim for academic status with many more staff contributing to its knowledge base (Harland and Staniforth, 2003). Blackmore and Blackwell (2006) on the other hand, suggest that academic development could be about researching the institution, providing data and proposals based on evidence. Despite academics being intellectually rigorous and analytical, they are not noted for their development of theory in their own practice (Tight, 2004). However, as each discipline has its own view of what constitutes research and the nature of evidence, the academic developer would also need to become expert in both evidence-based practice and have the ability to interpret what it might mean in order to work effectively across disciplines (Blackmore and Blackwell, 2006).

Some of the tensions inherent in the field of academic development relate to the notion of professionalisation. Whilst there is evidence of increasing numbers of PhDs in academic development, there is still a view of academic development as craft based and not amenable to codification (Lee and McWilliam, 2008). Indeed, at the research site, the role of learning and teaching co-ordinator does not require any specific formal qualifications, although many do have a higher education teaching qualification and are also studying for postgraduate qualifications related to learning and teaching. In this respect, they would not be regarded as “professionals” by those who

define professionalism as having a system of examinations and a licence issued by an external authority (Hoskin and Anderson-Gough, 2004).

However, more recent interpretations of “professional” view it as denoting a culture or a set of values used when thinking about an occupation (Saunders, 1995a). In this view, professionalism would involve exercising judgment, care and responsibility, autonomy and independence, problem solving and receiving trust and authority. If we accept this view of professionalism, the learning and teaching role is undoubtedly “professional”. This view is confirmed by some of the co-ordinators themselves who were asked whether they saw the role as “professional” during the interviews for this thesis.

Although views polarised, most were in support of the role as professional.

One participant pointed out that the role has a management dimension, it is to do with strategy, policy, coordination, ideas in academic setting, it is reasonably well-paid and you have to be qualified (although in fact there is no formal requirement for any qualification other than an undergraduate degree). For this co-ordinator, it is very important to have a professional role because she is no longer practising in her professional field, and she sees this as a new development of a professional career. One interviewee, however, took an alternative view:

*“Because the co-ordinator role is more about co-ordinating, managing things, doing tasks, organising things and I don’t think that’s recognisable as kind of a professional activity.....Maybe if I’d had more actual training or access to personal development in the role then I might see it as being more professional because there would be achievements that were to do with my development so it would be CPD*

*style, I have succeeded in doing this therefore I'm evolving towards something and that would be more of a professional feel"* (participant 9).

This participant's view of professionalism appears to relate to the need for formal training and qualifications (note the reference to "achievements"). However, in line with the strongest views of the interviewees, for the purposes of this thesis, I am going to define the role as a professional one, based on the more recent definitions of professionalism as proposed by Saunders (1995a).

#### **4.4 The institutional context: Riverside University**

Riverside University is a post-1992 institution delivering undergraduate and postgraduate courses to over 19,000 students. It does place importance on research, although Research Assessment Exercise ratings do not place it amongst the top research universities in the UK. As a former polytechnic, its reputation for teaching is good, although many of the scores used to rank the university relate to teaching assessments completed more than five years ago. More recently the institution has, in line with other UK higher education institutions, been rated by the National Student Survey. Whilst teaching at Riverside has not been rated amongst the top scorers across the sector, it is not unsatisfactory. However, as these scores are now used by all the major ranking exercises (e.g., Times, Guardian etc) and deemed to affect reputation, learning and teaching issues remain at the forefront of the university's priorities.

A formal learning and teaching strategy was first developed at the research site in 2000 in response to the requirement by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) for institutions to provide a learning and teaching strategy in order to receive teaching quality enhancement funding. This was reviewed in 2003 by the Academic Development Centre with contributions from the seven university faculties. Three key areas were emphasised, each with the student at the centre:

- To improve the student experience of learning, teaching and assessment
- To develop an integrated framework for student support and guidance
- To develop an appropriate infrastructure to support the strategy

To facilitate the implementation of the strategy, learning and teaching co-ordinators were recruited in each of the seven Riverside University faculties. Posts were funded by Widening Participation monies from postcode premium funding. At the same time, Teaching Quality Enhancement Funding paid for 0.4 principal lecturer posts in each faculty to lead on educational technology. The recruitment of the educational technology leaders was seen as important to ensure widespread take-up of Blackboard, the institution's chosen electronic learning management system. Learning and teaching co-ordinators were expected to work closely with the educational technology leaders to facilitate the overall implementation of the university's learning and teaching

strategy. In addition, learning and teaching co-ordinators were expected to continue in a teaching role in their respective faculty, in order to stay in touch with the realities of teaching and learning.

In creating such a structure for strategy implementation, the university appears to be following a combination of “devolved” and “strategic” models (Gibbs *et al.*, 2000). The learning and teaching co-ordinators, along with the educational technology leaders, appear to be members of a faculty team responsible for their own strategies, with central policy, goals and monitoring. The model follows that identified by Gibbs *et al.* (2000) amongst other post-1992 Universities, i.e. a strategy that aims to tackle challenging situations such as increasing student numbers and the changing nature of the student body.

#### **4.4.1 Theories of change at the research site**

Policy implementation at the research site usually involves the development of a central policy by central committees, which is then passed down to faculties for local implementation. There is an acknowledgment amongst the members of the Academic Development Centre (who are often charged with implementing change) that attempting to impose standard implementation procedures on very different structures would be counter-productive, and would result in a lack of ownership at the faculty level. As a result, change is often variable across the faculties. For example, each faculty has a learning and teaching committee, and in one case there are also school-level learning and teaching committees. An illustration of the very different approaches across faculties is the varied relationship each learning and teaching co-

ordinator has with the faculty learning and teaching committee. For example, in one faculty, the learning and teaching co-ordinator is a member of the learning and teaching committee, which until recently was chaired by her line manager. In this case, the line manager (as chair) would set priorities which were not necessarily the learning and teaching co-ordinator's priorities, yet there was little scope to influence those. In another faculty, the learning and teaching co-ordinator chairs the learning and teaching committee, providing opportunities to shape priorities and in a third faculty, the learning and teaching co-ordinator "*works closely*" with the chair (who is not his line manager) and feels satisfied that he has influence over priorities.

Analysis of policy implementation carried out as part of the Doctoral Programme (Anderson, 2005a) revealed several theories of change at the research site, in particular when change was considered to be vital by senior managers. For example, a decision to increase student in-take targets was a decision that was largely viewed as imposed upon staff (Anderson, 2005a) and was an example of a technical rational approach to change (Knight and Trowler, 2001). Other initiatives appeared to reflect a bureaucratic process approach to change (Knight and Trowler, 2001). One particular initiative, involving the introduction of a key skills policy, demonstrated the need to develop change at a local level, rather than with a "one size fits all" approach. Although Knight and Trowler (2001) suggest that a bureaucratic process approach to managing change has limited relevance for the research area of academic life, my own studies for the Doctoral Programme (Anderson, 2005a) observed several examples of "work arounds" at Riverside University. For

example, the central policy of modularisation was implemented in one faculty (for undergraduate programmes) in 1999. However, staff responsible for implementation found resistance to the policy and only implemented it in part (accepting semesterisation but not complete modularisation; the “work around” of year long modules were retained in preference to the semester long modules adopted by much of the rest of the university). The same research identified frustrations in the Academic Development Centre that there is no “steer” regarding an institutional approach to change, although interview data pointed to them preferring a bureaucratic process approach in which directives are issued centrally but then developed locally. This approach was often supported by the existence of formal external guidance such as the recommendations issued by the Quality Assurance Agency. The importance of some type of driving force, such as Quality Assurance Agency guidelines, has been recognised by Fullan (1999) who argues that mandates do matter, legitimising those working at local level: “top-down mandates and bottom-up energies need each other” (Fullan, 1999, p.19).

Collegial approaches to change are also present at the research site, despite Knight and Trowler's (2001) recognition of the difficulties for higher education in the time needed to develop collegiality. They also note that some schools and faculties do not always welcome collaboration. Criticism of this perspective offered by the authors includes the fact that collegiality can mask inequalities and exploitative power relations, in particular in relation to agenda setting. The notion of collegiality in higher education is also explored by Hellawell and Hancock (2001) who interviewed fourteen middle managers

about their perceptions of their role and in particular to what extent was collegiality still a significant factor in the university's internal decision making. They found that despite the problems associated with collegial decision-making, participants still considered collegiality to be the most important form of decision-making in higher education. They did note some problems with collegiality, noting that at the lower levels it appeared to work fine, but at higher levels in the hierarchy, collegiality decreased. Communication between sites was cited as problematic although they also noted that sometimes this suited individual sections who wanted to work independently (Hellawell and Hancock, 2001). They also noted (supporting Knight and Trowler) that decision-making could be swayed by powerful staff with their own agendas, and that it can be a slow and difficult process. Nonetheless, despite the associated problem, collegial approaches to change were viewed positively at Riverside.

To summarise, a range of theories of change appear to underpin policy implementation at the research site. No one theory of change is dominant within the institution or its departments and often the theory is not explicit. Whilst a collegial approach is viewed positively, the importance of some driving force which may be the result of a bureaucratic process (in particular linked to external mandates) is apparent. A technical rational approach, (although not viewed favourably) could also be identified as underpinning some centrally driven initiatives.

## **4.5 The role of the learning and teaching co-ordinator**

In the next section, I will explore the role of the learning and teaching co-ordinator in more detail. Drawing upon work completed as part of the Doctoral programme (Anderson, 2005; Anderson, 2005a), I will present an analysis of the learning and teaching co-ordinators as academic developers and as middle managers. The learning and teaching co-ordinators' job description is presented in Exhibit 1 below.

### **Exhibit 1: The learning and teaching co-ordinator's job description**

#### **Extract from Riverside University Job Description: Faculty Learning and Teaching Strategy Co-ordinators**

##### **Main Purpose of the job**

- To facilitate and co-ordinate the implementation of the University Learning and Teaching Strategy within a Faculty (delivery of a faculty strategy subsidiary to the University one).
- To support the evaluation and monitoring of the University learning and teaching strategy.
- To disseminate good practice within the home faculty and across the University.
- To contribute to generic projects that arise from the L+T Strategy for the benefit of the University as a whole.

##### **Main responsibilities/duties of the job:**

- With the Faculty Educational Technology Leader to facilitate and support the implementation of the University L+T Strategy within a faculty (delivery of a faculty strategy subsidiary to the University one).
- To work closely with a network of faculty staff and committees to support the implementation of faculty plans
- To work under the direction of Academic Development staff as a member of:
  - the L+T Strategy team to discuss key issues related to the implementation of the strategy and disseminate good practice across the university;
  - the L+T co-ordinator team to plan implementation of particular aspects of strategy

- To work closely with the Faculty Educational Technology Leaders to ensure that sound pedagogic principles are embedded in ICT development in courses
- To play an active role in the respective faculty L+T committees and to periodically represent the L+T Co-ordinators team at the University L+T Committee
- To advise faculties and the University on staff development needs to support the implementation of the L+T Strategy and, where appropriate, support and implement staff development activities
- Advise as required faculty management groups (or equivalent) on strategic planning and decision making in the faculty in relation to the L+T Strategy

Academic Development Centre, Riverside University, 2003

Whilst the job description provided an outline of the role, no formal training was provided to co-ordinators. Each co-ordinator worked in very different environments and had to establish their own role in their faculty.

It does appear that the role of learning and teaching co-ordinator is one of middle management. In her study of learning, teaching and assessment co-ordinators, Clegg (2003) notes that until recently there has been relatively little attention paid to “middle managers”. Hellowell and Hancock (2001) were amongst the first to focus on this group, although their definition of “middle manager” included deans, associate deans and heads of departments. Briggs (2001) discusses the problems of identifying “middle managers”, commenting that the term middle management implies a hierarchical structure with an assumed “downward flow” of authority from the leader. In this, structure, the middle manager would become a key broker within the organisation. Furthermore, by controlling and influencing the flow of information, middle managers could become a creative source of organisational change. Clegg (2003) suggests that learning and teaching co-ordinators are part of a

privileged periphery i.e. a key group who can influence whether enhanced pedagogy does take place, or whether it remains the practice of an enthusiastic minority. Clegg's study concluded that there was no evidence that co-ordinators saw themselves as uncritically implementing a managerial agenda. They appeared to gain their identity from their schools and were able to be critical of both national and institutional policy. Research completed at Riverside University as part of the Doctoral Programme (Anderson, 2005) also found that co-ordinators did not see themselves as part of central or senior management, although, unlike the participants in Clegg's study, they did not always feel able to criticise the decisions and policies emerging from the centre. In fact, there was some suggestion of discomfort at times when having to implement unpopular policies in faculties.

Fullan (1999) suggests that middle managers have a crucial role to play in converting tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge (a process which, in Fullan's view, is a secret to the success of successful companies). Fullan goes on to caution against "groupthink" where members of a tightly knit group go along uncritically with the group. Whilst Fullan's recommendations may be based on a questionable methodology of looking at successful examples, then suggesting that a similar approach could work elsewhere, nonetheless, we can see some links with the work of learning and teaching co-ordinators at Riverside University. For example, some of the work of the co-ordinators has involved attempts to make tacit knowledge explicit (e.g. the production of an assessment and feedback guide, written guidelines on groupwork). By recruiting learning and teaching co-ordinators from faculties, and indeed

basing them in faculties, it could be argued that the “checks and balances” recommended by Fullan are being built in to prevent “groupthink”. As Fullan proposes: “This is why a healthy respect for diversity and conflict is essential, along with an openness and learning orientation to the environment and all its variety” (Fullan, 1999, p.16).

One aspect of the middle management role carried out by the learning and teaching co-ordinators is that of boundary crossing (Saunders, 2006; Engestrom, 2004): “We can say generically that when people in one social environment, be it in an educational institution or any social location, either another educational institution or..... from an educational environment to a place of work, then it can be depicted as a boundary-crossing process” (Saunders, 2006, p.17). In the sense that they move from one environment (e.g. their subject department) to another (the wider environment of their faculty) to another (the institution, the Academic Development Centre), and are also expected to perform the duties of module leaders, researchers, managers of courses etc., it would appear that boundary crossing is an important aspect of the role.

Overall, it appears that the learning and teaching co-ordinators do not see themselves as part of the managing structure. They see themselves as a group who act as “conduits” within and across faculties and often feel required to implement policy without a convincing evidence base (Anderson, 2005). All felt they were implementers of policy but views varied as to whether they could make policy, supporting findings from a study by Clegg (2003), who

suggested that learning, teaching and assessment co-ordinators felt themselves to be the people who had to translate policy, along with knowledge and rules, into action on the ground. I have defined the group as professional in the light of recent interpretations of professionalism which focus on a culture or set of values which include judgment, care, autonomy, problem solving, trust and authority (Saunders, 1995a) and not simply on qualifications and licences.

#### **4.6 Summary**

In this chapter I have charted the development of the new professional group of learning and teaching co-ordinators, linking its inception and development to national and institutional policies, most specifically initiatives arising from recommendations made in the 1997 National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education. We have seen that at the research site, a range of theories of change appear to underpin policy implementation. I have also analysed the group of learning and teaching co-ordinators, concluding that they can be regarded as a professional group responsible for implementing policies leading to organisational change.

## **Chapter Five: Findings**

So far I have outlined the context of the research, discussing the theoretical, policy and institutional context, drawing largely on secondary research sources. In this chapter, I will present the findings from the primary research data, notably the in-depth interviews with learning and teaching co-ordinators.

### **5.1 Overview and introduction**

Initial analysis of the interview data began by grouping the perceptions of the experiences discussed with the eleven participants into several categories, guided by the themes developed in the review of existing theoretical frameworks in chapter three. For example, I began by focussing on the participants' perceptions of their acquisition of propositional and procedural knowledge and their experiences of formal and informal learning.

Further, more detailed analysis saw the emergence of several new themes which eventually developed into those presented in this chapter. 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. As the analysis progressed, I was able to group these practices into "clusters"; in other words, groupings of practice which appeared to share a similar intention. Initially two broad practice clusters were identified: organisationally-derived practice clusters (activities clearly related to the list of tasks on the job description) and agency-derived

practice clusters (activities which contributed to individual participants' ability to complete the tasks required of them). Subsequent, more detailed analysis then revealed a series of practice clusters within each of these two clusters, again grouped together according to the shared intention. In this way, I am borrowing the approach taken by activity theorists, (in a similar way to Eraut, 2007) in that the first group of "organisationally-derived practice clusters" are practices whose main object or intention is completion of the tasks identified and reified via the job description. Within this cluster, practices have been labelled "systemic", "project" and "knowledge construction" practices. The second group of practice clusters comprises "navigation", "legitimation", "affirmation" and "motivation" practices. Again, borrowing from activity theory, here the intention is not simply the completion of a series of identified tasks, but for individuals to be "equipped" to engage in the organisationally-derived practice clusters. I have grouped these as "agency-derived practice clusters".

Analysis of the interview data also led to the identification of a second series of clusters relating to the resources drawn upon and in turn developed by the participants as they engaged in practice. These resource clusters were then grouped into "knowledge resources" and "enabling resources" according to their function for the participants.

In this chapter, I will present each of the practice and resource clusters, providing evidence for each by drawing upon quotations from the interviews. This use of quotations should also help to illustrate my findings more clearly by evoking the voice of the participants. I will also develop two vignettes to

demonstrate how, at the individual level, the combination of practice clusters and resource clusters contributes to the learning of members of a new community of practice. The chapter is structured as follows:

- **Organisationally-derived practice clusters**
  - Systemic/routine practices
  - Project practices
  - Knowledge construction practices
- **Agency-derived Practice clusters**
  - Navigation practices
  - Legitimation practices
  - Affirmation practices
  - Motivation practices
- **Summary of practice clusters**
- **Resource clusters**
  - Knowledge resources
  - Enabling resources
  - Combining enabling resources
  - Confidence
- **Summary of findings**

## **5.2 Organisationally-derived practice clusters**

The cluster of practices discussed in this section comprises systemic or routine practices, project practices and knowledge construction practices. They have been grouped into these clusters as they all entail activities

associated with completing the tasks outlined on the job description of the learning and teaching co-ordinator.

### **5.2.1 Systemic/routine practices**

Discussions revealed that all participants were involved in a set of tasks which I have categorised as systemic practices. These are characterised by routine activities, working within sets of rules. These practices often reflect the functional aspects of the role, as detailed on the job description. Systemic practices include attendance at faculty and university committees, producing summary reports and disseminating learning and teaching documents.

Despite their routine nature, the way in which these activities were implemented at faculty level varied across the group. For example, as co-ordinators of learning and teaching activities, participants are expected to write reports for both faculty and university committees; however, in each case, the experience varies. In faculty 2, participant 2 has no involvement in the actual writing, but does provide a summary of activities for the author of the report (a more senior member of staff). In faculty 1, the participant is virtually the sole author with some contribution from colleagues, such as brief conversations or summary notes.

Part of the job of learning and teaching co-ordinator is to “broker” information from one community to another. Each participant appears to have developed their own routines regarding dissemination practice, ranging from e-mail to newsletters to attendance at departmental meetings. Participants often acknowledged the need to present information in a way which the recipients would respond:

*“And my experience in HE has also been that the best way to facilitate change is by giving the evidence and so for example . ....I had to implement a whole new academic induction approach at (another) University. The way I did it was it was evidence driven. The voice of the student very much came out so I’d invested 18 months doing focus groups, quantitative as well as qualitative research to actually say to the academics ‘This is what the students are saying’ and although they didn’t like it, they saw the need for change and it’s about talking, it’s about facilitating” (participant 10).*

We see here an example of a participant drawing upon evidence to convince colleagues of the need to change. In an academic environment based on a culture of research and developing evidence, it is understandable that participant 10 has taken this approach rather than attempting to enforce change on a sceptical audience.

Whilst systemic practices undoubtedly include important aspects of the role of learning and teaching co-ordinators, it is notable that little of the detailed discussions with participants focussed solely on these routine practices. In the next section, a second cluster will be discussed.

### **5.2.2 Project practices**

The types of work discussed by participants often focussed on projects rather than routine, systemic practices, hence I have identified a cluster of “project practices”.

Projects included those that contributed to the university's learning and teaching strategy, such as the introduction of student support schemes and the introduction of personal development planning, which were mentioned by several participants. The tasks described during the interviews suggested that although the types of project were common to all participants, the way in which these were implemented was almost always different from one coordinator to the next. In the following exhibit, we can see examples of the very different approaches to project practices amongst group members:

Exhibit 1: Examples of project practices amongst group members

Participant 1: I was involved in a project that was to do with the introduction of a new module. I was part of a team that was responsible for the design and delivery of the module. We had to do a lot of research and we had to consult with the students. We also had to do a lot of marketing and we had to make sure that the module was well advertised. We had to do a lot of work and we had to be very organized. We had to make sure that we had all the resources that we needed and we had to make sure that we were on time. We had to do a lot of work and we had to be very organized. We had to make sure that we had all the resources that we needed and we had to make sure that we were on time.

Participant 2: I was involved in a project that was to do with the introduction of a new module. I was part of a team that was responsible for the design and delivery of the module. We had to do a lot of research and we had to consult with the students. We also had to do a lot of marketing and we had to make sure that the module was well advertised. We had to do a lot of work and we had to be very organized. We had to make sure that we had all the resources that we needed and we had to make sure that we were on time.

Participant 3: I was involved in a project that was to do with the introduction of a new module. I was part of a team that was responsible for the design and delivery of the module. We had to do a lot of research and we had to consult with the students. We also had to do a lot of marketing and we had to make sure that the module was well advertised. We had to do a lot of work and we had to be very organized. We had to make sure that we had all the resources that we needed and we had to make sure that we were on time.

## Exhibit 2: Introducing guidance on assessment and feedback

Assessment and feedback had been identified as a learning and teaching priority in the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy in 2000. Learning and teaching co-ordinators were expected to work on building awareness of the issue amongst colleagues and to disseminate examples of good practice. In the table below, I have drawn out the practice of two co-ordinators to illustrate how each chose to address the issue in their faculty:

Participant 1	Participant 2
<p>Participant 1 chose to draw together research amongst students, academic papers, sector guidance (Quality Assurance Agency publications), and case studies of good practice amongst colleagues in a tailored manual, using the in-faculty design team to create artwork. This was then disseminated in person at school meetings, with a brief presentation and opportunities for discussion.</p>	<p>Participant 2 was given very little time to put something together as a subject review was looming. Knowing that only academic research carried weight amongst her colleagues, participant 2 sourced key academic journal articles on assessment and feedback into a bound set and distributed them via the faculty administration office, with e-mail notification.</p>

In this exhibit, very different approaches to a similar project have emerged.

The example illustrates the different discursive repertoires in each faculty (Trowler, 2005). For faculty 2, debate might focus on the theories and models found in the literature; for faculty 1, debate or discussion might revolve around tutors' own practices. The example also indicates very different dissemination methods between the two, with participant 1 able to take a much more personal approach, delivering the guide face to face.

### Exhibit 3: Introducing Personal Development Planning schemes

In line with the Quality Assurance Agency guidelines on Personal Development Planning all students should be given the opportunity to engage in some type of personal development scheme during their university course. This led to the introduction of a wide variety of schemes at the research site, each taking into consideration the subject discipline, previous schemes and the attitudes of staff to personal development planning as a worthwhile activity. Learning and Teaching Co-ordinators were charged with ensuring that each faculty complied with the requirements. Once again, findings indicate a variety of approaches:

Faculty 5	Faculty 4
<p>Participant 9 was working in a faculty where it is difficult to find support for personal development. The faculty's subject area is largely numerical and production of personal reflective portfolios is seen as an unnecessary burden for both staff and students.</p> <p>Here, participant 9 introduced a very basic scheme, following the minimum Quality Assurance Agency requirement of simply making personal development planning available to all students.</p> <p>In this faculty, take-up has been limited and little progress has been made in actually getting more students to engage with personal development.</p>	<p>Participant 11 was working in a faculty where Personal and Professional Development is a part of the culture and continuous professional development has been embedded for many years. Here, very little new initiatives were needed; instead, participant 11 simply reported back to the central committees that various schemes were already in place.</p> <p>In this faculty, take-up is very high with most students fully engaged in reflection and production of their own professional development portfolios.</p>

In this example, participant 9 acknowledged the “codes of signification” (Trowler, 2005) that the term “personal development planning” contained amongst members of his faculty. With this in mind, he simply set out to meet the minimum requirements, whereas, for participant 11, the existing level of acceptance and implementation of personal development planning schemes required very little effort on her part, yet a high level of activity was in place.

Many of the projects listed by participants were the result of implementing strategies set out by initiatives such as the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (1997) and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). For example, as we have seen above, the QAA's guidance on the introduction of personal development planning schemes meant that the group had to become familiar with the concept before schemes could be developed. In some cases, funding attached to implementation of policies provided opportunities to develop projects.

As a group, it was notable that engagement in project practices was a very useful way of learning. One participant felt that having several people working on small, individual projects was less useful than an opportunity to work on a medium sized task:

*“And everyone goes to all meetings and then there is nothing, then you're left to get on with it, there's nothing in between.... when you're right at the beginning of this it is very hard to then e-mail, you know, the rest of everybody to say “I'm doing this” and they say “well I'm doing this”. Then let's all work together, which sounds wonderful, but in practice is impossible, because there were just too many of us working on too many different things so I think medium-size projects that divide this chaos into smaller bits, but not so small that it's atomised, therefore, you spend all your time trying to liaise with 17 other groups all doing the same thing” (participant 2).*

This study suggests that the opportunities to engage in projects varies from context to context. Understanding how such opportunities to participate are distributed is, according to Billett (2004), central to our understanding of learning through working life. For example, for some of the participants, projects are allocated by line managers, usually to ensure institutional agenda items are dealt with. For others, free choice of projects is available and individuals can work in areas that interest them, or that add to their knowledge base (maybe even doubling up as source materials for MA or doctoral studies). For example, contrast participant 2 with participant 1 when deciding priorities:

*“my priorities within my remit have been different from my line manager’s....*

*I said at one point I really wanted to do something and he said “Okay, alright, that’s sixth on the list” (participant 2).*

*“And then in the end I decided that I probably should just do what I felt was right. So I did that and actually got on with things and projects and making some decisions and then reported back to my line manager on that side of things, who was the dean, and she seemed perfectly happy. And that’s how it is now. So I only see her really formally probably twice a year, last time it was at my request I think” (participant 1).*

In summary, project practices constitute much of the work of this group, but do vary amongst members of the group, both in the way they are executed and allocated.

### **5.2.3 Knowledge construction practices**

Although all forms of practice across all clusters do result in new knowledge, this cluster focuses on activities undertaken explicitly to acquire new propositional or conceptual knowledge.

Whilst the need to access propositional knowledge varied amongst individuals, overall, these participants valued propositional knowledge, contrasting sharply with Lave and Wenger's virtual total dismissal of conceptual, context free knowledge. For the participants, sources of propositional knowledge included web sites such as the Higher Education Academy, conferences, books, journals and outside speakers. Discussions revealed that propositional knowledge was most sought after and useful when respondents were first recruited into the role and asked to tackle learning and teaching projects that were new to them:

*"Well one of them was the PDP (Personal Development Planning). It was new to me when I first joined, the whole concept of personal development planning, I'd heard about it and I actually had very little experience of it and so it really was a case of reading as much as I could as quickly as I could.....I'd go to the HEA website and look at PDP" (participant 10).*

In this extract, we see a sense of urgency and a desire to quickly get up to date with the concept, although a reference to “little experience” suggests that if the participant had already worked with the concept, she would not need the reassurance of conceptual knowledge. Using the example of working on a project relating to student support, respondent 7 also explained that:

*“I quite often go to the HE Academy website and look in their resources and their database and I go to the subject centre, so for (her subject discipline).... Well just in terms of their resources, look up previously funded projects and what happened and sometimes get in touch with those people to ask if maybe we could use...in terms of best practice or maybe key studies.....”* (participant 7).

This respondent also explained that as the role evolved, she gradually moved away from outside sources of propositional knowledge, instead relying increasingly on her own experience. For example, although initial learning about a topic such as student support may involve theory in the form of journal articles, she quickly moved to seeking examples in her own context to understand how propositions could be applied in her particular setting. As the role evolved further, and her time was taken up with managing projects, she had less time for reading, although seeking to expand her knowledge base through papers and text books remained an intention.

In keeping with this idea of using knowledge in context, one respondent felt that in-house conferences organised by the university were more useful than outside ones:

*“The ones (conference) we organised ourselves I felt were better than anything else. Some of the speakers we had at our own conferences I felt we would have been better to use those slots for people who were doing good things here. We didn’t need outsiders to come in. I think that did have the effect of turning people off” (participant 4).*

Propositional knowledge is also valued to provide an indication of the wider picture. However, it was noted that topics covered by this role could be overwhelming and to try to be familiar with all of it could create a sense of inadequacy. One respondent spent the initial months in the role trying to learn about many topics but only realised in hindsight that it would be far more useful to focus on a small number of subjects and become knowledgeable about those:

*“Now, if I’d known then, what I know now, that to make myself into as much as I could, a specialist in a couple of related areas rather than try to encompass the whole, which just leaves you to feel completely all the time inadequate and not knowing enough. Knowing a little bit about lots of things, but nothing in-depth...” (participant 2).*

In this extract we see an example of a participant acknowledging the importance of reducing their “cognitive load by prioritisation and routinisation during their first year of employment” (Eraut, 2007, p.408). This will be discussed further below as we see examples of how participants prioritised their workloads.

Whilst the respondents expressed strong views on acquiring propositional knowledge, it should be noted that one participant, when asked about her use of journals and other publications, responded:

*“I can’t say I use those...”* (participant 3).

This respondent was a very experienced teaching practitioner who very quickly became immersed in the role and had access to management groups. She was an exception in the group and appeared much less concerned about the need to acquire propositional knowledge.

The value placed on propositional and conceptual knowledge by this group may be linked to the institutional context in that, as academics, participants may feel more comfortable falling back on theory compared to the insurance claims processors or tailors studied by Lave and Wenger. It was also notable that several participants were enrolled on postgraduate courses related to education and educational research, either at masters level (three participants), at doctoral level (three participants) or were involved with their

own research (two participants). Most had also completed the University's Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education.

Because much of the work undertaken by participants in this case study involved the dissemination of central policies and strategies, policies emerging from central government and higher education policy groups appear to affect what propositional knowledge is important to members of the group.

Emphasis on issues such as personal development planning, employability and student support means that those charged with policy implementation need to become knowledgeable in those areas. In a higher education environment, with its focus on academic rigour, research and evidence, there is added importance attached to drawing upon appropriate propositional knowledge, in a way which might not be the case in less academic contexts. However, whilst the importance of propositional knowledge was clear, participants were less clear about how such knowledge should be stored. Very few participants recorded knowledge in a formal way. Many mentioned keeping notes, and several expressed interest in keeping records but currently there appears very little formal record of any learning from the group.

### **5.3 Agency-derived Practice clusters**

In this section, I will move on from the organisationally-derived practice clusters associated with the functional aspects of the learning and teaching co-ordinator role and begin to uncover some of the agency-derived practice clusters revealed through the interviews. Many of these practice clusters could be described as "hidden" in that they do not form an explicit part of a job description, yet without them (and the resources created as a result of them),

it is difficult to see how the learning and teaching co-ordinators could carry out the activities required of them.

### **5.3.1 Navigation practices**

In this section, I will discuss a cluster of practices which contribute to the participants' understanding of the work context. I will explain how participants initially felt overwhelmed by the scope and requirements of the role, and I will continue by explaining how they coped by working out priorities as well as developing ways of understanding how things worked in their own settings. This includes seeking out "safe" support from colleagues and other groups.

Although not common to all participants, the feeling of being overwhelmed featured amongst several of the interviewees, particularly those who were in the role when the group was first established. With so much variation between faculties, there was little common ground to be able to define the territory:

*"I remember the first-year feeling that there was so much to do, some of which I didn't really understand how it all hung together. I felt bemused and feeling oh dear, I don't know how I'm going to operate on all these fronts and there were areas of work that I didn't even know existed and I couldn't see how they all linked together..."*(participant 2).

One way of dealing with it was to focus in on specific project areas. This happened during the first year of the co-ordinator role. The head of Academic Development identified some key areas and co-ordinators were invited to

choose which they would like to specialise in. This was viewed particularly positively by participant 2:

*“so we identified six areas, and I feel that my faculty and me personally have got interest in this particular knowledge or expertise in one or two, and then my learning came from asking or targeting people in my own school or faculty...”* (participant 2).

Working out priorities also featured in several discussions. Some had colleagues with whom to work, others had to spend time finding out who the appropriate people were in order to begin developing priorities. Often, co-ordinators would turn to policy documents for an indication of priorities:

*“I suppose I did it quite mechanistically because the Learning and Teaching Strategy had clear dates for priorities when the things had to happen so we could look across the faculty at what needed to be done or not, what was already done, what needed attention and focusing on those projects”* (participant 3).

*“...we were sent away to come back and produce maybe the key aims of one of the points or whatever it was. So we really worked with the learning and teaching strategy itself”* (participant 4).

*“and various documentation, like, originally the learning and teaching strategy, and now the quality enhancement strategy give me a lot of ideas about things”* (participant 9).

Respondents generally (with some minor exceptions) did not find the job description helpful. Comments about its vagueness were common

*“I suppose the job description has been least helpful..... That's the only formal documentation I've had about the role..... it either needs to be replaced or supplemented with other information”* (participant 9).

*“it's somebody else's idea of what the job is rather than somebody who's actually done it”* (participant 8).

Overall, participants valued the opportunity to work together as a group. Reassurance was gained from knowing other people were working on similar issues and the possibility of drawing on each others' ideas was strongly appreciated. Having a broad set of priorities was seen as positive, and the opportunity to focus on key identified issues such as “the first year experience” or assessment and feedback appeared to work well:

*“At least there was a shared sense that this is the area of development work that's happening and you kind of, you have the reassurance from knowing that other people were working on things and you could, could*

*find out more about what, you know, what was going on in a different faculty and maybe you'd draw on, on it" (participant 5).*

Interviews with early recruits stressed this positive view of working with coordinators from other faculties. As part of the formalising of the structure, cross faculty groups were created to work on inter-disciplinary projects.

*"I think that's right and it was also a bonding experience across the staff group as well" (participant 5).*

We have already seen how different faculties operate in very different ways. Although standard, institution-wide policies are developed, the way those policies are implemented varies widely according to the culture, structures and people in each faculty. Because of this, each learning and teaching coordinator needs to uncover for themselves how things work in their own faculty. Interviews revealed that finding out how things worked in specific contexts was one of the biggest challenges faced by most participants. Feelings of helplessness and of being overwhelmed when first recruited in the role were expressed in several interviews and have been discussed above. The tacit nature of much procedural knowledge meant that manuals did not exist and that power relationships were not always understood. This extract summarises succinctly the feelings of many of the participants:

*"But it's very difficult to say how it worked across faculties, because one thing that I realised, which in my innocence, I hadn't, was how much*

*the culture of each faculty differs in terms of management, feel, organizational structure, personalities of the people with the power. Talking to my colleagues, it could be a different world, what they were talking about, not the same university, so that was something that was quite an eye-opener to me, what I could do, or was asked to do or get involved in, was done very differently from somebody in the next faculty” (participant 2).*

Interviews revealed that participants spent a great deal of time trying to understand how to go about their role. One of the first things to understand was how the whole institution functioned:

*“I remember distinctly one of our colleagues doing, in an attempt to give a graphic picture of how the various learning and teaching committees and related committees and standing working parties and things fitted together, and he did the most wonderful map, visual map of all the committees with dotted lines” (participant 2).*

At faculty level, it was also desirable to understand how things worked, reflecting Blackler’s (1995) identification of the importance of “knowing about” rather than “knowledge that” with a growing emphasis on social skills and client relationships. Some relied on other colleagues, some eventually simply became involved in projects as a way of getting to know how things worked. However, most respondents did acknowledge that in the early days of being in

the role, finding out (clarification) how to get things done was important and often difficult:

*“No, not in a straightforward fashion. And also not very quickly. It’s taken me a long time to become aware of these things, and so growing the role organically takes 12 months before you’ve even found your feet”* (participant 9).

In order to develop an understanding of the way things worked, some of the participants explained that they began by working with close colleagues:

*“Well it was quite useful to have as a colleague and friend previously in common with the position so I helped her initially with some of the stuff that she was doing”* (participant 8).

By engaging on a project on personal and professional development, one interviewee learned that his preferred way of communication (by e-mail) was not appropriate and largely ignored by colleagues. Another found that her lack of understanding of the power relationships and internal structures in her faculty led to uncomfortable meetings in which she felt humiliated.

Further help with understanding of their situation would be appreciated by participants in several areas: more documentation, an opportunity to work on medium sized projects, some formal training, an opportunity to find out more

about the power structures and political set-up in their own contexts and an opportunity to work with a mentor.

*“I think more formal information about the structure and the relationships and emphasising the key relationships, because this time last year, I think I vaguely knew who my line manager was, effectively in the faculty, but it wasn't very clear, who on the faculty side, in terms of the people managing me as it were, ...they were not very hands-on, so I was kind of left to do my own thing” (participant 9).*

Others expressed a desire for some formal training, although it was noted that this could be stultifying, especially if it restricts the parameters of the role. An important set of information was the way faculties worked: the committee structures, the economic underpinnings, the management structure, the learning of the person in the role previously. The most common request was for a mentor:

*“so this passing on of knowledge, informal transmission of knowledge, what you're actually doing on a day-to-day basis, that would be useful I guess so if we could have some kind of mentoring I suppose, I'm coming to ...now that I think about it, some kind of mentoring by somebody who's done it or somebody who's doing it to show you the ropes, I guess would be useful” (participant 9).*

Whilst stating a desire to have someone explain the internal operations to them, most did acknowledge that this would be difficult to do, given the different cultures and working patterns across the faculties. It was also suggested that too much knowledge of power structures and procedures could stifle developments, preventing any creative initiatives.

As an analytical tool to understand “how we do things around here”, “teaching and learning regimes” have been identified by Trowler and Cooper (2002). Teaching and learning regimes involve a constellation of nine cultural components or “moments” of the social process which are interlaced with social practice (Trowler and Cooper, 2002). If we take examples of some of these “moments”, we can see how participants began to learn about “how we do things round here”. For example, by participating in projects and systemic practice, interviewees gained an understanding of the “development and attribution of codes of signification” (Trowler and Cooper, 2002). Terms such as “modular structure”, “employability”, “widening participation” could often be code for something else imbued with local, contextual meaning. One participant found that “employability” was viewed as an unwanted nuisance amongst colleagues who did not see it as part of their role to develop a student’s employability skills. Others, working in more vocationally based subject areas such as Business and Law or Healthcare did not encounter such problems, as employability has always been an important element of a student’s studies. Both have work placements as an integral part of courses and much of the assessed work relates to work practices. In another example, one participant was involved in the introduction of a key skills framework. The

reaction of staff to the proposals enabled him to understand the codes of signification attached to “key skills” amongst his colleagues:

*“I thought I was going to have to talk about it, and instead the key people at this place picked up the document, key skills document, waved it around as if it was something dirty and spent twenty minutes destroying the whole idea “What are we?” You know “What is this?” I mean “Nothing to do with us” (participant 2).*

Participation in projects and systemic practices can also contribute to understanding of tacit assumptions. These “taken-for-granted assumptions” (Trowler and Cooper, 2002, p.229) relate to most aspects of higher education. For example, assumptions about students’ prior learning, about the use of technology, about what would and would not work in a particular department. The development and use of rules of appropriateness as an area for development were highlighted by participant 9 who found that e-mail was not useful in one faculty for disseminating information. Colleagues simply ignored his e-mail messages and he had to find an alternative communication tool if policies were going to be implemented.

Overall, findings suggest that participation in work, whether via project or systemic practice is crucial to understanding “how things work round here” in a complex organisation. Manuals rarely exist and much knowledge remains tacit. Participation is a very powerful (and perhaps the only) way to uncover the assumptions and rules that must be understood to work effectively. As a

cluster of practices, these navigation practices may not be explicitly identified or reified in written job descriptions, yet are essential if members of a community are to engage in organisationally-derived practice clusters associated with the role.

### **5.3.2 Legitimation practices**

In this section, I will discuss a cluster of practices which contribute to the participants' feelings of legitimacy, focussing on their credibility and validity in the role. I will explain how participants often felt the need to gain the respect of colleagues and how some of their work entailed demonstrating the group's validity to others in the organisation.

Working across faculties and amongst several communities of practice to implement change requires that co-ordinators are regarded as credible individuals. Colleagues are unlikely to listen to a co-ordinator who is unable to empathise and appreciate the difficulties and challenges faced by teaching staff. Indeed, the model upon which the group is based is one in which they remain in a teaching position alongside the co-ordinator role. Without the resources to fund changes on anything other than a very small scale (and then only by pointing out sources of funding), co-ordinators must rely largely on gaining the interest of colleagues, encouraging them to develop initiatives and then share their experiences. Some participants addressed the need to build credibility amongst colleagues by developing several learning and teaching systems and processes. One participant, for example, listed a whole range of projects which she had instigated for her faculty. Part of this was

because very little progress had been made prior to her joining the faculty, but it was also a way of establishing credibility amongst colleagues:

*“ I do feel that I have to get my hands dirty to give myself some credibility and understanding so I think there has to be a little bit of that” (participant 10).*

Another participant, concerned with how she was perceived by colleagues felt that engagement in a project would give her credibility:

*“And in a way, I have an apprehension. I suppose it’s the same with everybody, how you are perceived by people is important and I don’t want people to perceive me as not doing something when I know I’m giving it 100% ....which is why I said to you I have to go in and get my hands dirty and to be involved so that people will actually say ‘oh this person is around and is doing something” (participant 11).*

By being able to point to their own experiences as suggestions for possible initiatives, participants felt that they were more credible than simply just offering advice:

*“So I mean over the last few years I’ve actually tried to be, well rather than somebody who sort of suggests to other people that they might do I’m trying to try and do things and then say to people “Look, this is how*

*I did it, this worked, this didn't work and maybe you should try." You know, kind of .....do it that way" (participant 10).*

Working outside of the institution also contributed to some of the participants' feelings of credibility. For example, the opportunity to compare experiences from other universities was seen as valuable by some participants:

*"I'm an external examiner at another university and I think that's quite interesting in terms of appreciating how far we've come with our university and I do actually think we can hold our heads high, certain policies, you know, "maybe you should get one"" (participant 11).*

*"Well I've done two lots of external examining, which have helped. Although obviously it's about your own discipline, it's a way into how other institutions see things, and one was in England and one was in Scotland, so that was very interesting and that was helpful too" (participant 2).*

As we have seen already, several participants were enrolled on or had completed postgraduate study in learning and teaching. This undoubtedly contributed to their feelings of credibility:

*"During the EdD I do a module on professionalism. That's given me quite a bit of confidence in doing what I want to do whereas before I would not have been so determined I guess" (participant 8).*

The ability to draw upon research and to have a sound understanding of research methodology was also cited as helpful by a participant completing a doctorate in education.

In addition to the personal need for credibility, there was also pressure from management within the university to justify the group's existence. As a new group, there was constant need to explain what was being achieved; in particular the group was compared to the group of Education Technology Leaders who had been recruited at the same time:

*“we were being told we had to validate our own existence, as opposed to the educational technology leaders, who had a specific job to do, which was to introduce Blackboard and it's very quantifiable: how many staff have been brought on board, how many modules were up and running and it's very satisfying. It was presented to us that this was very good because they had aims and objectives that could be measured against specific learning outcomes, whereas we had the impression we were still trying to do bits across the whole university, and having zilch impact” (participant 2).*

Engaging in projects was seen as a way of demonstrating that things were getting done:

*“Yeah, there was a strong sense of, in the early stages as I remember it, it’s all coming flooding back to me now, that we, the pressure was on quite early on to show that... that really tangible things were happening” (participant 5).*

One way of validating the activities of the group was to refer to external and institutional requirements. For example, reinforcing Fullan’s (1999) assertion that mandates matter, legitimising those working at local level, outside quality reviews and validations seem to add weight to the proposals and projects developed by co-ordinators. The availability of funding to support policy implementation was also useful when trying to persuade colleagues to become involved in projects:

*“There was a huge amount of money available and then there was more emphasis on quality assurance in looking at institutional review and I tried to frighten people I think by telling..... I tried to go round schools and say why this is important” (participant 4).*

The opportunity to use policy in this way (almost as “clout”) also meant that co-ordinators were able to gain support from key people in the institution who could reinforce the importance of particular issues:

*“Well what I did for peer review, it was an awful lot of, not underground, but spade work on my part and I organised, I think it was to the end of the faculty forum, it was something where everybody would be there*

*and (academic development centre member A) came up and talked about it, it was only for about 10 minutes but it did get people interested” (participant 4).*

The issues discussed above relating to building credibility and validation may not be common to all working groups. As the group is newly formed, there is the need to cope with working out its position in the organisation, and an apparent need to justify its existence. This would not be the case with an established and stable community of practice, although there may be times when groups do need to “fight” for their existence, for example in the case of organisational change and restructuring.

### **5.3.3 Affirmation practices**

We have seen that members of the new group need to understand the context in which they operate (navigation practices) and that they need to feel credible in the role (legitimation practices). I am now going to discuss a cluster of practices that contribute to their need for reassurance in the role.

In discussing their work, respondents spoke very positively about the non-threatening environment which had been created by regular meetings where the group had an opportunity to bounce ideas and share experiences:

*“But I do think we do share a lot with each other which I find is quite good actually because we don’t tend to hold back or keep anything. It’s not a competition and that probably helps because we come from different faculties and things like that” (participant 11).*

In addition to the regular meetings themselves, interviewees also found the informal discussions following the meetings to be particularly useful. Without exception, all participants found the support of the other members of the group invaluable:

*“I found all of the group very supportive. I don’t know why it was. We were all much in the same position.....and the support from the other members within the group was one of the most valuable experiences I’ve had in my career so far” (participant 4).*

*“Other teaching and learning coordinators have been really fantastic, just actually sort of saying ‘(participant 10) you’re alright. This is what we’re doing and actually it’s going to be a slow process. You can only deliver so much in a certain amount of time” (participant 10).*

We can see from these extracts that respondents had a need for reassurance and affirmation as they engaged on the different projects and systemic practices required of the job. Affirmation and reassurance appears to come most strongly from within the group, possibly because of the non-threatening and non-competing nature of its members.

University committees were seen as a possible source of affirmation for members of the group, although there were very few examples of committees being perceived as positive support for the role.

*“And in terms of support for my role I mean I would say that my main support were individual colleagues rather than committees. I didn’t find committees at all supportive. I mean there weren’t, they were structured, but they weren’t, I didn’t find committees particularly good places to go to get support”* (participant 6).

On the other hand, there was a feeling amongst some respondents that by not disagreeing with an individual’s proposals, a committee has supported them. However, this did not necessarily feel like strong support. As one of the respondent’s commented:

*“Yeah, it’s not so much moral support as it’s, it’s more a kind of……. machinery, the machinery worked for you”* (participant 5).

In addition, on the negative side, the time involved in the committee cycle meant that support was not always possible in the short term:

*“but on the grand scale of things, it’s just not having, not being able to react quickly enough and get something off the ground. You have to go through committee cycles, it could be a year down the line before you’ve had an idea, a year down the line before you can go for an implementation and it’s difficult”* (participant 10).

If there was a close relationship with the chair or key members of relevant committees, then they could be supportive:

*“my learning and teaching committee has always been very supportive in the sense that I, I had quite a close link with the chair of the committee and I was able to, to have quite a lot of influence over exactly what was done in the committee, although I wasn't always quite sure how useful that was”* (participant 5).

One aspect of the identified affirmation practices which emerged as valuable was the notion of feedback. As with many of the experiences of the group, there was little common ground amongst participants in their experiences of formal feedback in the form of appraisals. Some participants had been appraised by their line managers on an annual basis, some had been appraised by their manager in the Academic Development Centre and some had had neither.

*“I've been appraised, but not by (manager A). My faculty arranged appraisals at the end of last year, and that effectively involved both sides of my job. I was appraised by (manager B), who was the ex-chair of the learning and teaching committee, so she had an idea of what I was doing and should be involved in the role, but (manager A) was only involved because I asked her if she wanted to see my appraisal after it had already been done, so a better way would have been to have it is a joint appraisal”* (participant 9).

Others saw the more regular meetings with their line managers as more useful than appraisals to gain formal feedback on their work:

*“Well we’ve decided, well I’ve decided that we have a regular fortnightly meeting regardless of perhaps what we have to discuss. We don’t particularly have an agenda but we just meet so I can feed back on some of the issues that I’ve been talking to people around see whether that fits in with our area of faculty strategy”* (participant 11).

This participant saw the meeting as an opportunity for two way feedback, something that was also possible at the regular meetings amongst learning and teaching co-ordinators. These acted as useful reminders of issues to be addressed and as opportunities to review how activities fitted into wider university strategies. Meetings gave participants the opportunity to report on activities they had been involved in and share ideas for further work. For one participant, this was far more helpful than formal reviews:

*“Just for knowing where I am really without it being linked to appraisal in any way, just to get a better idea of the strategic vision and also the day to day plotting what I’m doing.....I suppose it was monitoring in a way but it’s also, it felt less oppressive than the formal”* (participant 2).

In addition, informal chats in the corridor and over coffee were mentioned by several of the participants as useful sources of informal feedback.

*“Yes, I know, I’m laughed at by some people, but it’s (having informal coffee in the staff refectory) the most powerful way of finding out”*  
(participant 2).

We see here the importance of “hybrid spaces” for learning (Solomon *et al.*, 2006) as participants often spent time in staff rooms and refectories chatting to colleagues, gathering information and working out key relationships.

The absence of feedback was seen by some of the participants as frustrating, in particular if they needed to be corrected in their understanding. For example, one participant felt that he had identified the relevant groups of faculty wide people who needed to be informed to enable a personal development planning scheme to be implemented. It was only much later that he found out that he had “*got the wrong end of the stick*” (participant 9) in that these were precisely the wrong groups to involve, with the result that the project was unlikely to get started. Participant 9 did not have any explanation as to why nobody corrected him, although he did acknowledge that there are no clear ways of working in his faculty, so he assumed that people thought his knowledge was as good as anyone else’s.

The opportunity for feedback was seen by one participant as an opportunity to overcome some of the stresses of the job:

*“I’m feeling particularly stressed at the moment and I think that aspect of feedback, or lack of it, or feedback that’s slightly sort of stick rather than carrot type of feedback is probably one of the things which would make life less stressful” (participant 2).*

Feedback could also help clarify what is expected of a person. This was not always easy:

*“and finding out exactly what my faculty expected of me was difficult” (participant 9).*

To summarise, affirmation in the role came from several sources, both formal and informal, with the non-threatening meetings with peers viewed particularly positively. Formal feedback procedures were not uniform across the group, and often more informal meetings with managers were felt to be much more valuable.

#### **5.3.4 Motivation practices**

The final agency-derived practice cluster encompasses activities identified as motivational for the participants. Whilst there is much overlap with affirmation practices, I have identified examples of where participants were not only reassured that they were on the right tracks, but also motivated in their work.

Motivation practice included encouragement from individuals and groups from a variety of sources. Line managers, other members of the learning and teaching co-ordinator group, key individuals and other colleagues were all mentioned as sources of supportive encouragement.

The level of support from the faculty based line managers was variable.

Where strong support was evident, participants expressed a great deal of confidence, even if they were unsure of how to approach something:

*“but I think of course I feel perhaps I could wing it shall we say because I have (line manager)...And so I kind of knew in a way that I would have that support so for me, in a way I have had a cushion, a safety net that I would have that person there that would be able to guide me”*

(participant 11).

Not all participants experienced such positive support:

*“And apart from that really, that is about it really because to be blunt, within the faculty itself, no-one really wanted to have any interest in it whatsoever. They didn’t want to do it, it was very much driven by me”*

(participant 10).

Most respondents could also identify particular individuals who had been encouraging to them. The immediate line manager from the Academic Development Centre was identified by almost every interviewee. Other individuals included other members of the Academic Development Centre, usually in relation to specific projects:

*“(Academic development staff member B) was really, really, really helpful and tried to understand its, the concept of PDP in terms of (my discipline area)” (participant 10).*

*“I found (academic development staff member A) absolutely excellent. I think she has a really good way of encouraging people and making you see that what you do is worthwhile. And the support in every way from the centre was absolutely great” (participant 4).*

Other participants mentioned individuals in their own faculties who had been supportive. This could be others with an interest in learning and teaching, or could be those such as course directors who could be supportive in implementing particular initiatives.

*“I mean again people, I suppose for me at the moment I’m finding my feet. It’s such a huge hoop and what importance they are, not that they’re not important but in terms of are they the most appropriate people to see for this particular kind of issue really and so I suppose I’m very much reliant on other people giving me advice like I went to see a Head of School the other day. She said this is the person that you need to talk to. So they’re giving me names and contacts for me to be able to...” (participant 7).*

From this extract, we can see the importance of identifying exactly who can provide the most appropriate contacts to be able to progress with projects.

Without this type of support, it is difficult to understand how participants would be able to engage in systemic and project practices.

Motivation (or lack of it) could also come from ownership of a particular activity:

*“So I think there’s an awful lot going on at the macro level that I don’t, and I’m not ever invited to Faculty Management Group, so I feel very much an implementer of other people’s decision without actually having been involved” (participant 2).*

In this case, participant 2 was not motivated at all, yet when faced with an opportunity to develop one of his own initiatives he felt completely differently:

*“But when something has been identified, like the development of the post graduate academic skills support, where I have been asked, right you’ll lead this, you go and get this letter out and meet course directors. So it’s formal feedback on my role. But it’s giving me a clear task to do which then allows me to work informally across a number of people, some of whom I haven’t met before. That I think is the most rewarding because I have an official remit with some power behind me from the top. But then left alone enough to be able to get on with something that is creative and doing something” (participant 2).*

Eraut (2007) found that the right level of challenge in work was important and that motivation was influenced by the sense of choice over work activities. Whilst this has not been a major feature of my research, we have nonetheless seen examples to support a relationship between motivation and ownership of an activity.

### **5.3.5 Summary of practice clusters**

Findings so far have illustrated how the organisationally-derived practice clusters of project, systemic and knowledge construction practices are also dependent upon a set of agency-derived clusters which develop an understanding of the workplace and its workings along with the legitimacy, credibility and validity and motivation of the new working group. In the next section, I will identify the set of resources which are both outcomes of engaging in the practice clusters and in turn provide tools for engagement in those clusters.

## **5.4 Resource clusters**

In discussing their work, respondents revealed the resources drawn upon as they engage in work. Participation in all practice clusters resulted in new resource clusters which could then contribute to and improve practice. I have classified resource clusters into two broad groups: knowledge resources and enabling resources.

### **5.4.1 Knowledge resources**

Knowledge resources cover many types of knowledge including prior and new knowledge, propositional or conceptual knowledge and knowledge about the way things work.

Some of the knowledge resources drawn upon by the participants were the result of prior knowledge, and findings suggest that participants are more comfortable participating where they have some prior experience:

*“So I very much came in knowing that there was a clean slate and because of my background, because of my knowledge, I suppose in a way I automatically intuitively and professionally knew what needed to be put into place, just because of my experience”* (participant 10).

Despite not having had an initial meeting with manager A from the Academic Development Centre, participant 10 nonetheless felt able to: *“get off the starting blocks and run very, very, very quickly”*. Participant 3 also had no qualms about the role due to her own experience in learning and teaching:

*“it seemed to me that the right opportunity was to use the learning and teaching skills and to take a step further and take a step out of the department and the learning and teaching thing seemed the right thing to do”* (participant 3).

Participant 7 had already started to get involved in learning and teaching projects based on her own experiences in the role of lecturer:

*“So I saw it as a way of getting more involved in learning and teaching projects. I was on the learning and teaching committee and I had*

*started an MA in education. So they were all issues that I was interested in and it was continuing those issues, enabling me to develop those things” (participant 7).*

Despite drawing upon prior knowledge, most participants felt the need to develop further conceptual or propositional knowledge. This could be explained as a contribution to their credibility (legitimation practice), but it also appeared that implementation of projects linked to institutional and national policies required an understanding of those policies. On the whole, participants had no problem with the development of what Blackler (1995) would classify as “embrained” knowledge. They saw it as a useful contribution to their workplace learning, especially in the early days of the role, suggesting that the acquisition of propositional knowledge offered a “safety net” when participants were inexperienced and seeking understanding. Propositional knowledge acquired in the early days of the learning and teaching co-ordinator role was most useful when applied to a specific context. These findings support Eraut’s (2007) work on early career learning which proposed that formal learning contributes when relevant and well-timed, but needs further workplace learning before used to best effect (Eraut, 2007). Throughout the interviews, there were numerous examples of participants exploring papers and web sites to find out about issues and then going on to develop activities in their own environments. This also supports work by Fuller and Unwin (2003; 2004) who saw examples of apprentices accessing conceptual and theoretical knowledge on college courses which was unlikely to be obtained through on-the-job experience alone. The difference here is that the participants

themselves often identified, then sought the propositional knowledge rather than having it presented as part of a structured and considered course of study designed specifically for the apprentices. Certainly, the notion of propositions as timeless and context free with a “classical, transcendental status” (Hager, 2004, p.249) is not supported in this study as participants harness conceptual knowledge in order to make judgments and recommendations in their own context.

Embrained or propositional knowledge is often codified by signs and symbols into books, manuals and guides (Blackler, 1995). In addition to accessing such materials as they engaged in knowledge construction practices, participants also contributed to the production of encoded knowledge by producing manuals and guides for policy implementation. Publications such as the Quality Assurance Agency guidance booklets and documents such as the institution’s learning and teaching strategy were mentioned as sources of knowledge for all participants. Some participants felt that there was not enough encoded or reified knowledge to help them in the workplace, although complex knowledge often “defies simple forms of representation” (Eraut, 2007, p.404).

Knowledge of “the way we do things round here” (Saunders, 1998) was a resource sought and developed by all participants. This “embodied” knowledge (Blackler, 1995) can be explained as “knowledge how” and tends to be action oriented, largely tacit, context specific and involves practical thinking (Blackler, 1995). There were many wishes expressed in interviews to

codify this type of knowledge, although again, drawing on Eraut's (2007) work, it appears that much cultural knowledge is acquired informally and its "amenability to codification has been greatly exaggerated" (Eraut, 2007, p.405). Indeed, as much of this knowledge is context specific, its usefulness across communities is questionable.

Similarly, amongst participants there were mixed feelings about whether it would be possible to make tacit knowledge explicit, to formalise the informal. Whilst it has been suggested that it might be worthwhile to try and make explicit some of the experiential knowledge held by an individual or group which is locked in practice (Saunders, 2005b), there does appear to be a contradiction and tension between attempting to write things down which then do not have relevance for other contexts. This leads to the question of whether it is possible to make explicit those concepts which are understood best within a specific context? For example, the concept of personal development planning is possible to understand by referring to literature. However, full understanding of implementation would need a contextual view. Indeed, Trowler (2005) notes that a social practice perspective militates against any simple model of 'evidence based practice' (Trowler, 2005) because what is best for one place may not suit somewhere else, due to the very different teaching and learning regimes across an institution. However, if we position "best practice" as a possible solution to a problem rather than the "one best way" (i.e. "it worked here when we had this particular problem") we could encourage reflective thinking and initiate appropriate change.

Participants were very positive about the informal regular meetings amongst the group when they had an opportunity to share their experiences in the form of stories. We can see how this contributes to the development of encultured knowledge (Blackler, 1995) or the process of achieving shared understandings. By discussing and reliving their experiences, participants are developing their own, socially constructed knowledge.

Embedded knowledge (Blackler, 1995) is knowledge which resides in systemic routines; relationships and material resources would be significant. It is analysable in systems terms e.g. in relationships between technologies, roles, formal procedures and emergent routines. We saw examples of participants attempting to make explicit their understanding by drawing charts of how committee structures worked and how they fitted into the organisation, suggesting that this type of knowledge is often hidden, yet important for a new community of practice.

To summarise, as participants engaged in the identified practice clusters, they developed and drew upon a set of knowledge resources. However, it was apparent from the interviews that they were also developing an additional set of resources which will be discussed in the next section.

#### **5.4.2 Enabling resources**

So far we have seen that participants are drawing upon and contributing to the development of a set of resource clusters which have been grouped as “knowledge resources”. Analysis of the interview data has revealed that, in addition to knowledge resources, participants are also developing a set of

additional resources which “enable” them to carry out the activities required of them. Once again, because the context for each co-ordinator varies, these resources are not always the same for each individual. However, it has been possible to identify support, guidance/direction and feedback, along with confidence, as a cluster of resources which I have labelled “enabling resources”.

### **Support, guidance/direction and feedback**

In discussing the role amongst participants, the concept of support as a resource emerged strongly, although it was necessary to revisit several participants to probe further for a full and detailed understanding of its specific meaning. The different types of support mentioned by this group ranged from emotional support provided by colleagues and line managers to documentation and structures such as policy documents, committees and working parties.

As a resource, one of the most valued learning environments for participants was the programme of regular meetings held to discuss progress and priorities. In university committee structure terms, these meetings have no status, yet all participants found them helpful. It was noted that the reason for this was precisely because of the informal and “safe” nature of the meeting. No one was competing with anyone else, each member’s circumstances were different, no one felt threatened and unable to ask seemingly simple questions. This closely reflects Eraut’s, (2004a) work where it was noted that the extent to which it is possible to take advantage of mutual engagement

depends on friendly relations, but also the confidence to ask questions without fear of ridicule.

In addition to the emotional support offered by other people, several participants referred to other resources. For example, a small group of respondents suggested that they felt unsupported where resources had not been allocated to them. For example, some participants had not been freed from teaching responsibilities, therefore felt unable to carry out their learning and teaching co-ordinator roles fully. Others had no desk or phone when recruited into the position.

*“My frustration personally is that I don’t have a desk, I don’t have an office” (participant 10).*

The issue of time as a barrier to learning was raised. For example, participant 9 found his faculty line management supportive in terms of attending courses, but this had to be in his own time, with little reduction in his teaching commitments.

In addition to guidance from other individuals and groups, respondents in this study also sought guidance from sources such as policy documents and committees. Documents such as the Learning and Teaching Strategy, academic papers outlining case studies and the job description were referred to constantly, although not all were found to be very helpful. Again, this has not been covered widely in the literature, although Eraut (2007) does identify

mediating artefacts (Eraut, 2007, p. 416) as one of nine learning activities in the workplace. Closer reading of mediating artefacts however suggests that the documents referred to by Eraut are more about documents relating to the day to day activities of the job (audit files, design specifications) rather than broader policy documents. This may relate to the nature of the learning and teaching co-ordinator role i.e. the emphasis on implementing learning and teaching strategies. Billett (2001) also identified guidance, both direct and indirect as a contributor to learning practice at work. However, guided learning strategies are limited to modelling and coaching. Results from this study would suggest that guidance is wider than this, in particular in the areas of informal guidance available from colleagues.

#### **5.4.3 Combining enabling resources**

My findings suggest that feedback is linked strongly to guidance but not all feedback is useful as guidance. For example, some respondents had received negative feedback during appraisals, with no positive guidance. Whilst these examples were rare, they nonetheless highlighted the danger of assuming all feedback is helpful. Generally feedback divided into formal and informal and could originate from many sources, including appraisal, self-reflection and discussions with colleagues.

Eraut's (2007) triangular model relating to learning factors links together feedback and support. However, findings from this study suggest that feedback and support are two very separate factors which do not necessarily go hand in hand. Support and guidance could also be considered to be very similar but, as I will attempt to demonstrate below, by considering them

separately, individuals' experiences and access to participation in work vary widely. In my study, we see for example, instances of individuals who receive high levels of guidance (or direction); at the extreme end, one co-ordinator is presented with a list of tasks and priorities, but no emotional support; others who are in the position of defining their own priorities, yet being supported, at least in a "default" way. By combining the two, we arrive at four different types of learning environment explained and illustrated in exhibit 4, below, with examples from the interviews:

#### **Exhibit 4: Combining support and direction: the development of learning environments**

##### **Learning environment A**

##### **Supported and directed**

(Participants 7, 11)

These participants did appear at times overwhelmed by the scope of the job yet seemed able to cope because of the levels of support and guidance available to them. Generally positive towards the role, participants in this category had few worries about whether they were tackling the right projects. Both very confident, participants 7 and 11 had regular informal and formal meetings with managers during which time they discussed progress, priorities and plans. Therefore, even when the "size of the territory" felt huge, these participants were able to confidently prioritise.

##### **Learning environment B**

##### **Directed but not supported**

(Participant 2)

Only one participant fell into this category. Although very well regarded outside his own faculty, he was never able to make decisions as to how to take an initiative forward and would always need to consult with managers. Despite this, the

opportunity for regular feedback from line managers within the faculty was not available. This participant had also been deliberately kept out of initiatives in which all other co-ordinators were involved. Despite many years' experience and postgraduate qualifications in learning and teaching, this participant did not appear confident about the role and displayed concerns about always having to consider the internal politics of the faculty.

### **Learning environment C**

#### **Supported but not directed** (Participants 1, 3, 4, 5, 8)

This group shared experiences in setting their own agendas, although for many, the early days in the role were quite bewildering. As they engaged in systemic and project practices, they gradually developed their own ways of doing things. Sometimes they sought guidance which was provided (and therefore they felt supported in their role) but they rarely had to take direction from others. All in this group appeared confident in their roles and very positive about the projects in which they were involved.

### **Learning environment D**

#### **Not directed and not supported** (Participants 9, 6, 10)

Participants in this category set their own agendas but appeared to have no support from within their faculties. Basic resources had not been allocated (desk, time to attend staff development events). Unlike the other categories identified, the levels of confidence were very different amongst the group. For example, when first interviewed, participant 9 had very little confidence. Unsure how to do very basic things like communicate with colleagues across the faculty, he received no guidance, even when his decisions were not good. A later interview revealed growing confidence, based on having completed some successful projects. Participant 10, on the other hand displayed high levels of confidence from the beginning of her time in the role. This appeared largely as a result of prior experience in related posts. Despite the lack of support and guidance, this participant very quickly instigated several high profile projects amongst very cynical colleagues.

From the analysis in the exhibit above, there appears to be a tension inherent in allowing complete autonomy at the individual level, and providing enough guidance to enable people to develop the role confidently. A total lack of guidance may result in individuals floundering and feeling bewildered, although as long as support is available, it seems possible to remain positive. On the other hand, too much direction in the form of control could result in a loss of ownership, and if support is not available, it appears difficult to remain positive. The challenge for those charged with managing such groups is how to ensure individuals benefit from ownership, yet provide enough guidance to ensure people are not uncertain about their role. This will be addressed in the conclusions and recommendations in chapter seven. It is also apparent that Learning environments A and C correspond closely to the expansive learning environments identified by Fuller and Unwin (2004a). Learning environment B on the other hand has much more in common with the restrictive environments identified: “rigid specialist roles”, “bounded communication and work”, “manager as controller” (Fuller and Unwin (2004a, p.130). What is less clear is where learning environment D (not supported, not directed) fits onto the expansive/restrictive continuum. Despite almost unlimited freedom to instigate activities without consultation (arguably “expansive”), participants are nonetheless restricted by the lack of support and resources which would suggest their environment is in fact “restricted”.

The enabling resources discussed so far are influenced by organisational factors. The next enabling resource is different in that it is an individual resource.

#### 5.4.4 Confidence

Confidence has emerged as an important factor for learning in this study. Without the confidence to take on a project, participants are reluctant to engage in work and therefore miss out on the learning opportunities available to them. Confidence appears to be linked to knowledge, experience, support, guidance and feedback. More normally steeped within psychological approaches (Graven, 2004), confidence in this study is largely the result of engagement in social practice. For example, confidence could be as a result of something an individual undertakes (being involved in a project, presenting a conference paper, reading a journal article) or it could be as a result of feedback; either a formal appraisal or some feedback from colleagues or even a “well done” from the dean. It could develop from being able to air issues in a non-threatening way amongst other learning and teaching co-ordinators. Because confidence provides participants with additional means to engage in projects and systemic practices, I have categorised it as an enabling resource, although unlike support, guidance and feedback which are part of the organisational context, it is a resource which resides at the individual level. In this way, it could be an element of an individual’s disposition, although one which has not been addressed in depth by those who have highlighted the importance of individual dispositions for learning in the workplace (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000; Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2003; Evans *et al.*, 2006)

To summarise, in addition to the knowledge resources developed by members of a new community of practice, we have seen that they also draw upon and develop a set of “enabling resources”. Some (support, direction/guidance,

feedback) will relate to organisational factors. The unit of analysis for these might vary from the macro to the micro level (university wide, department, one particular colleague) making it difficult to locate these enabling resources within any one community. Enabling resources can also be developed at the individual level, notably, confidence.

## 5.5 Summary of findings

Table 3 provides an overview of the findings so far, identifying both the practice and resource clusters emerging from the interview data.

**Table 3: Summary of findings**

<b>Practice Clusters</b>	<b>Resource Clusters</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Organisationally-derived practice clusters</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Systemic/routine practices</li> <li>○ Project practices</li> <li>○ Knowledge construction practices</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Agency-derived practice clusters</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Navigation practices</li> <li>○ Legitimation practices</li> <li>○ Affirmation practices</li> <li>○ Motivation practices</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Knowledge resources</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Prior knowledge</li> <li>○ New knowledge <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Propositional</li> <li>▪ Procedural</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Enabling resources</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Structural/organisational <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Support</li> <li>▪ Guidance/direction</li> <li>▪ Feedback</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Individual <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Confidence</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>

## 5.6 Vignettes

In this final section of my findings, I have drawn upon the interview data to develop two vignettes which I will use to illustrate how the practice and resource clusters combine in individual cases to provide an insight into the learning of members of a new community of practice.

## Vignette 1: a positive learning experience

Participant 2 works in a faculty perceived by him as having high level of “top-down” management. Whilst this means levels of guidance are strong (in fact participant 2 is told what his priorities are), participant 2 finds this restrictive and demotivating. In exhibit 4 above, I have classified this as learning environment B, “directed but not supported”, reflecting closely the restrictive environment characterised by “rigid specialist roles”, “bounded communication and work”, “manager as controller” (Fuller and Unwin, 2004, p.130). However, participant 2 was able to give one example of a very positive learning experience.

*“I thought right I’m going to do a project within the learning and teaching strategy, but something I wanted to do.”*

In line with a major university priority (Blended Learning), participant 2 was able to pull together previous experience of an educational technology technique to develop something that no-one else in the faculty had done. Note the emphasis on “something I wanted to do” suggesting that ownership was important to this participant.

Supported by an outside body and working collaboratively with staff from another institution:

*“I was supported though by the xxxxx project..... They had a researcher who did a lot of literature research and made available to all of us in the Project X thing”*

Participant 2 was able to combine prior knowledge with new propositional knowledge in a situation where he felt supported (both emotionally and resource wise). As a result of the project, participant 2 presented at two conferences, published in an online journal article and contributed an article to a book with an expert in the field. Participant 2 sums up the experience:

*“There’s nothing that I could write or research that hasn’t been done by my colleagues I feel at this stage in terms of discipline. It’s too late to do stuff in subject discipline A because I’ve abandoned that now..... So the*

*confidence thing came from attaching myself to something that was related to my learning and teaching interest, but new, or perceived as new and a bit geeky by a lot of people. And what's the point of doing that? But I enjoyed it. Apart from the technological nightmare which I didn't enjoy. Pushing my own boundaries a bit. And that gave me confidence. And it was great. And I can now say I've got these publications."*

*"..... it's something that I've taken up with support, obviously not done it on my own."*

Participant 2 also identified instances when confidence was low:

*And I felt unconfident because I was wallowing around, I'm not sure what I'm supposed to be doing, there's a bit on this and a bit of this. But when I got on a project, a learning and teaching project, like the (project X), that forced me to, or encouraged me to.*

This vignette allows us to see how some of the factors discussed so far have combined to provide a very positive learning experience which resulted in an increase in the confidence levels of the participant. The project highlighted a link with institutional strategy (blended learning) which influenced the initial opportunity for the practice. Working within institutional priorities also provided the legitimacy needed for the project. Access to the practice was helped by the support available (although not in this instance from immediate line management but from outside groups) and because the project built on prior experience (creating audio files).

## **Vignette 2: introducing Personal Development Planning**

The introduction of a new Personal Development Planning scheme by participant 10 amongst reluctant colleagues provides the context for the second vignette. Participant 10 works in a faculty which I have classified as learning environment D in

exhibit 4 above (not directed and not supported), one which does not appear to fit neatly onto Fuller and Unwin's expansive/restrictive continuum (Fuller and Unwin, 2004).

Before the idea of PDP could be launched within her faculty, participant 10 had to spend time researching the concept:

*"It was new to me when I first joined, the whole concept of personal development planning, I'd heard about it and I actually had very little experience of it and so it really was a case of reading as much as I could as quickly as I could.....I'd gone to the HEA website and look at PDP. I would look at HEFCE and the relevant websites to understand what PDP was about, why we needed to implement it, when it needed to be implemented".*

Participant 10 then turned to another source of knowledge: the Academic Development Centre:

*"When I started working on the PDP, I suppose that's the first time I really came into contact with ADC and I started working on that probably as I started working on it about 2 months after I'd been asked by the Deputy Dean to actually get involved in PDP because the person who'd done it before hadn't been very well and they needed to get it implemented fairly quickly. And so quite almost immediately I very much came into contact with ADC. As a result of ADC, started to very much get the plot of what were the university priorities. I also knew what the university priorities were because of my background with (researcher x), with (senior manager y) etc. But ADC were really the body that helped me understand what the university priorities were..."*

Note that she not only needed to understand the concept but also needed to understand the policy context and background. She also had to consider how the concept of PDP could be "positioned" in a reluctant faculty:

*"(The management and ) the deputy dean who wanted me to implement it had no knowledge or concept themselves. They just knew they had to do it, so within the faculty, it was a bit like treading water because no-one knew, no-*

*one understood and it's trying to break down the concepts, for example of PDP so that everybody understood what it really meant and without it being scary. What is Personal Development Planning? Let's be blunt. It sounds like .....wishy washy nonsense that we have to do because an external body has said, yet again, we've got to do something. So one of the challenges was not actually the PDP but trying to get down a definition of what the PDP was that academics would not balk at which is why I called it Self Reflection and Assessment, Individual Self Reflection and Assessment and ....it's about getting you to help students to reflect on their work by saying "actually a lot of you do it already". It's not extra work. So that was the biggest challenge."*

Participant 10 continued to explain how she found help for the project:

*"Person x in the Academic Development Centre was really, really, really helpful and tried to understand its, the concept of PDP in terms of (my faculty) and that was my challenge really to see how, because basically it's about self-observation and assessment of one's work and a bit like the audit cycle. Absolutely my end field was based on quality, it was based on audit basically in general practice. So my whole experience of many years ago was very much grounded in audit quality processes but how did, for me the challenge was how do we do something like PDP that we've got to implement and actually when I had very little knowledge of, how could we implement it in (my faculty) while satisfying the external conditions, the university conditions but also the (discipline) conditions. And it was a challenge and with no money and trying to bounce it off what we've got, I needed to talk to a lot of people to say well is this workable? So that really, the PDP was my first challenge and to be honest with you, it still is a challenge".*

In this vignette, we see how participant 10 spent time on firstly building her knowledge resources drawing on sources of propositional knowledge along with seeking help from key individuals and groups (notably the Academic Development Centre). We also see participant 10 taking account of the discursive repertoires, development and attribution of meanings and codes of signification (Trowler, 2005) which contribute to the teaching and learning

regime (Trowler, 2005) in this faculty. For example, she realised that the codes of signification attached to PDP (“wishy washy nonsense”) would be a barrier to the introduction of PDP unless she could position it as something more amenable. Taking advantage of the discipline’s need to comply with external professional bodies’ requirements, participant 10 repositioned PDP as “self reflection and assessment”. In this way, she provided the legitimacy needed for the project in a way that could be understood by her reluctant colleagues. We also see the proactive nature of participant 10 as she seeks help from several sources, not only to understand the concept and its importance, but also to be clear about how it would be perceived and therefore what would be needed to gain acceptance amongst her colleagues. This alignment of proposals with the culture of the particular department and the official external requirements appears to combine legitimisation practices with navigation practices, contributing to the ultimate goal of implementing the new PDP policy in the faculty.

## **5.7 Chapter summary**

Chapter five has drawn upon and interpreted interview data with the learning and teaching co-ordinators in an attempt to explain the way in which the group develops in the role. I have identified two related important aspects: their engagement in a series of practice clusters and their use and development of a set of resource clusters. I have also combined some of the resource clusters (notably support and guidance) to demonstrate how these might create very different learning environments for individuals in the workplace.

In the next chapter, I will discuss these in more detail and in relation to the concepts reviewed in chapter three.

## **Chapter Six: Analysis and discussion**

In this chapter, I will discuss my findings in more depth and in relation to the existing theory on learning, practice, knowledge and expertise in the workplace. I have divided the chapter into three broad sections. In the first I will discuss learning in the work place; in the second, I will analyse whether legitimate peripheral participation offers a full explanation of the learning of a new community of practice and in the final section I will review the notion of expertise in relation to my findings.

### **6.1 Learning in the workplace**

Analysis of the interview data has confirmed the “complex dynamic” (Saunders, 2006) involving engagement in practice and the creation and subsequent use of resources by participants as they learn at work. Two types of practice 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”, “affirmation” and “motivation” practices. In circumstances which are new, often concepts are not yet familiar,

in which case participants need to acquire new propositional knowledge, but more importantly, the way things work are not yet familiar. 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 and they provide the reassurance and motivation needed to continue in work.

As participants engage in the practice clusters, new resources are developed. Firstly, new knowledge resources evolve, helping participants to understand unfamiliar concepts, but also to understand procedurally how things work. A second set of resources has also emerged. I have labelled these “enabling resources” as they are resources which can enable participants to engage in different practice clusters and therefore provide opportunities for learning. Although enabling resources would include the intentional organising of access to direct and indirect guidance in the workplace (Billett, 2001), I would argue that enabling resources as defined in my study include more than just opportunities for practice and as such are different from the affordances proposed by Billett. Whilst opportunities are important, the support and guidance needed to take advantage of them is just as important. Enabling resources would also include resources such as policy documents, space and time. Billett’s notion of access comes from a position where opportunities for access appear to be arranged (via a workplace curriculum) by someone responsible for monitoring a worker’s performance. Whilst Billett proposes that a workplace curriculum should include the use of guided learning strategies by

more experienced co-workers, the implication is that these are developed by managers other than the workers themselves. However, my study suggests that often this group need to proactively seek guidance from a range of sources (including other members of the group) without any contribution from line managers.

This focus on the active agent in my study is in keeping with a move towards acknowledging the importance of the individual in studies of learning in the workplace. We saw in chapter three that as social theories of learning began to emerge, largely inspired by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998), there was a shift in focus away from the individual to the social aspects of learning. Whilst avoiding a full return to an exclusively individual focus, recent studies have nonetheless begun to introduce the notion of an individual who does exert some control over their learning. Billett (2002), for example, sees affordances and opportunities for practice as important, but it is individual agency which will determine how opportunities for practice are taken up. This trend has also been noted by Saunders (2006), who identified that in recent boundary crossing narratives (notably Engestrom, 2004) individual agency has once again been emphasised.

An enabling resource which does demonstrate the need to consider the importance of individual agency is confidence. Confidence was not discussed in depth by Billett, although it could be seen as an implicit aspect of an individual's "disposition". Confidence was, however identified in studies on early career professional learning by Eraut (2007). It was also identified by

Graven (2004) who concluded that confidence was pivotal in explaining mathematics teacher learning. In my study, participants often referred to situations where they had become more or less confident. This might be the result of completing a successful project or it could develop following confirmation from others that they had done a good job. In all cases, confidence appeared to develop the individual's ability to take on further projects and therefore engage in further opportunities for learning, in other words it "enabled" further learning and therefore I included it as one of the enabling resources developed and drawn upon by this group.

Despite the focus on the individual, the organisational context has not been overlooked in this study, and in the previous chapter we saw the importance of organisational enabling resources such as support and guidance, and in particular how the combination of these could affect the individual's learning environment. In turn, the learning environment could contribute to the development (or not) of an individual's confidence. Whilst not as wide-ranging in scope as the expansive/restrictive continuum developed by Fuller and Unwin (2004a), my findings did suggest that a two-dimensional continuum may need to be re-considered, especially around the notions of support and guidance. This was particularly evident when attempting to locate learning environment D (not supported, not directed) in Exhibit 4 in chapter five onto the expansive/restrictive continuum developed by Fuller and Unwin (2004a).

Although often mentioned in studies of workplace learning, support is rarely explored in depth. An exception is work by Eraut (2007), based on findings

from the work related to early career learning. For Eraut, support is mainly from colleagues when doing the job or as back up when working independently. Billett also identifies that “the kind of workplace activities that individuals are able to engage in and their access to guidance are central to their learning” (Billett, 2002, p.461). However, whilst this does include some reference to guidance, the explicit nature of support has not been detailed.

Feedback is another enabling resource identified in this study, with respondents seeking both formal and informal sources. This supports the work of Eraut (2004) who identified the importance of giving and receiving feedback for learning in the workplace. In Eraut’s later work, looking at mid-career learning, a triangular model featuring challenge and value of the work, confidence and commitment, and feedback and support was developed and applied to three professional environments: accountancy, nursing and engineering. Although the themes of challenge and value of the work did not explicitly emerge in my findings, there were examples of the negative feelings associated with feeling totally lost and overwhelmed (not dissimilar to the “anomie” expressed by Durkheim (1952) and developed in work by Saunders *et al.*, 2005). The value of the work was not explicitly discussed in my interviews, although in my interpretation of the discussions, I propose that the issue of ownership is related to the notion of “value” in that participants appeared to prefer work where they had been involved in the choice of topics or projects rather than those which were simply allocated to them. This was particularly evident in vignette 1 in chapter five.

Another potential enabling resource not researched in this thesis is the set of bridging tools developed via evaluation studied by Bonamy *et al.* (2001).

Viewed as resources to enable the achievement of “provisional stability” in uncertain conditions (such as higher education), bridging tools are a potential enabling resource which allow for stability as participants move across the boundaries of one kind of learning experience to another. I propose that the enabling resources identified in my study are not only resources which enable movement between different environments, but also resources which enable engagement in all environments. In this way they would differ from bridging tools.

The emerging paradigm for conceptualising learning (Hager, 2004) suggests that both the learners and their environment are changed as participants learn and new sets of relations develop. Amongst this group, it appears that as coordinators learn about issues such as Personal Development Planning, they are able to change their environment, not just by introducing such concepts, but also by changing the way they instigate change. For example, participant 9 at one point would have attempted to disseminate a new policy by e-mail. However, his experience has shown him that this is not effective and he has changed the method to one where he meets face to face with key individuals, creating new sets of relationships and new ways of doing things. Implicit in this approach is a regard for the cultural and social dimensions of the context (Hager, 2004).

Overall, this study confirms that learning in the workplace of a new community of practice is highly complex (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2004a); no one theory is sufficient to explain all aspects and learning encompasses several different types of knowledge. Unlike the communities studied by Lave and Wenger, members of a new community in higher education do appear to value conceptual knowledge, although it should be noted that its status as context free is not supported as respondents seek to apply it to their own contexts. Equally important is the knowledge of how we do things around here, the knowledge of systems and structures, whose word counts, how to communicate. In fact the “moments” of a teaching and learning regime (Trowler and Cooper, 2002) provide a useful analysis of the areas of understanding necessary to a community charged with implementing change in a higher education environment.

## **6.2 Legitimate Peripheral Participation**

One of the key aims of my research was to question whether existing social theories of learning, in particular the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) can explain the learning of a working group in a complex organisation. At the heart of Lave and Wenger's theory of learning is the concept of legitimate peripheral participation. Subsuming the learning of knowledgeable skills, legitimate peripheral participation involves moving towards full participation in the socio-cultural practices of a community. Legitimate peripheral participation is not meant to be a pedagogical form or a teaching technique, but rather a viewpoint on learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

A feature of the studies completed by Lave and Wenger was the cohesive nature of the communities, which meant that experiences amongst individuals did not vary greatly and members shared much common practice. As we have seen in the findings of my research, whilst the group of learning and teaching co-ordinators did share some common practices, much of their work involved operating in varied contexts, leading to strong differences within the group.

In the next section, I will discuss my findings in the context of Lave and Wenger's work on communities of practice and legitimate peripheral participation. The framework in Exhibit 5 provides a comparison of the practices and hence the learning in Lave and Wenger's communities and those of the new group of learning and teaching co-ordinators in this study. I will discuss each of the points in detail below the exhibit.

**Exhibit 5: Established and stable communities of practice compared with a newly-established community**

<b>Learning in a community of practice in established, stable environments (as studied by Lave and Wenger, 1991 and Wenger, 1998)</b>	<b>Learning in a new community of practice</b>
Importance of "shared understanding" within the community of practice	Importance of "shared understanding" within the community of practice is limited to propositional and institution wide issues; also need for "shared understanding" amongst other groups
Existence of field of "mature practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991 p 110)	No field of mature practice
Newcomers' tasks are "short and simple" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p110)	Newcomers' tasks could be highly complex
Central role of experts within the community	Number of experts inside and outside community
Importance of support from within the community	Importance of support from number of sources, inside and outside community

<p>Linear movement from periphery to centre</p> <p>Expertise is in the technical expertise of a specific practice, as well as understanding the ways of a community</p> <p>“Passive” role of novice in accessing participation</p>	<p>No linear transition from periphery to centre</p> <p>Expertise is about some technical expertise, but more importantly about expertise in how to get things done</p> <p>“Active” role of novice in accessing participation</p>
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### “Shared understanding?”

For Lave and Wenger, there is a focus on “shared understanding” amongst members of a community of practice. In my research I have seen a need for shared understanding, but this appears to be restricted to an understanding of common contexts (institution and macro level) and propositional knowledge rather than an understanding of faculty and department level issues. There is little need for shared understanding amongst group members of “how we do things round here” at the faculty level when this varies so widely. It does seem, however, that there is still a need for shared understandings amongst a different set of individuals, suggesting that in a boundary crossing role, individuals must work towards findings key individuals or groups with whom to develop shared understandings. These understandings might be of “codes of signification” or “rules of appropriateness” (Trowler, 2005). For example, “employability” has different codes of signification shared within faculties linked to the vocational nature of the courses taught. Whether face to face or e-mail communication is more appropriate for dissemination of policy might also vary at a faculty level.

## **A “field of mature practice”?**

A feature of the interviews in my study was the frequent reference to the “size of the territory” and the worry about how to understand it. There was no feeling that practices had been established. On the contrary, participants were developing understanding and beginning to develop routines for themselves via projects. Findings revealed that projects often resulted in engagement in navigation and legitimation practices. This contrasts strongly with Lave and Wenger’s work where: “More generally, learning in practice, apprentice learners know that there is a field for the mature practice of what they are learning to do...” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.110). From my study alone, it is difficult to predict when a field of practice might become “mature”. Interestingly, even the most experienced of the group of co-ordinators still had concerns about the role and the ways to approach some of the projects in which she was involved.

In a “mature practice” it is possible that some of the practice clusters identified in this research would be less important. For example, do existing groups need to establish themselves via legitimation practices or is their existence accepted without question? In established communities, where the ways of working are already understood (at least by the full participants) it may be that some navigation practices are not as important as in a new community where ways of working are still being negotiated.

### **Newcomers' tasks are small and simple?**

For Lave and Wenger (1991), newcomers' tasks are small and simple but for my respondents, all had examples of large-scale, challenging tasks which had not been done before (e.g. developing and introducing guidance manual on assessment and feedback, introducing personal development planning and student support schemes). This may explain the feelings of being overwhelmed expressed by some of the participants, particularly during the early days in the role. Findings suggest that most found a way of completing the challenging tasks, although the extent to which participants felt comfortable with this depended upon the resource clusters available to them (prior experience and levels of support, guidance and feedback).

### **The central role of the experts?**

For Lave and Wenger (1991), expertise is linked to becoming a full participant in a community of practice. By participating in practices within a community, novices gradually acquire experience which enables them to develop into experts (or old-timers). It is difficult to see how this might help understand the learning in the working group being studied. For example, whilst some of the learning and teaching co-ordinators are more experienced than others, their expertise relates to their own context and knowing how things work there. The more experienced co-ordinators are not responsible for allocating work, therefore can have no influence on the legitimate peripheral participation of the newcomers. In some aspects of the role, a newcomer may have far more experience (e.g. in chairing committees) than some of the more experienced co-ordinators.

### **Sources of support?**

The source of support for newcomers appears much more simplistic in the communities studied by Lave and Wenger, where the “experts” or “old-timers” within the community appear to influence the participation of the newcomers. In my findings, in the absence of one clearly defined group of “experts”, the opportunity for participation becomes more complex. We have seen examples of individuals selecting their own areas in which to work (within the constraints of institutional priorities) and others who have work allocated by line managers, although without any evidence that those managers could be considered “expert” in the aspects of work covered by the learning and teaching co-ordinators.

### **From periphery to full participant; a linear journey?**

Connected with this absence of expert “full participants”, my findings also suggest that the “linear” movement of novices from periphery to centre (full participation) of a community (Lave and Wenger, 1991) does not offer a full explanation of the learning experienced by participants in my research. At this point we should note that a detailed reading of Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasises that movement from periphery to full participation is not linear as interpreted by some (e.g. Evans *et al.*, 2006). What is clear is that certainly in this newly formed community there is very little linear movement. Participants move from one work environment to another with varying levels of support and guidance.

## **Expertise**

For this group, expertise did not appear to be a simple concept of moving from periphery to full participation in a community, partly because it was not possible to define the notion of expertise. Some participants felt it was possible to develop expertise in “knowing how things work” and therefore in being able to instigate activity. As well as knowing whose opinion counted, the knowledge of how to get ideas accepted and generally having an overview of what is going on would also form part of this expertise. Whilst this is implicit in the experts in the communities studied by Lave and Wenger (1991), there is less emphasis in this study on acquiring learning and teaching expertise. This will be discussed in further detail in the final section of this chapter.

### **“Passive” or “active” role of novice in accessing participation**

My findings suggest that in the absence of experienced old timers, it is often up to the individual members of the group to seek out opportunities for participation. This contrasts sharply with members of an established community of practice where newcomers are almost “passive” in that they appear to be given tasks by the old-timers. In a complex organisation, where members are constantly moving from one environment to another, it is unlikely that the allocation of tasks is so simple. Members also need to seek out support and guidance from individuals other than the old-timers in a community. Their prior experience and knowledge can affect how much support is sought. Organisational structures and their level of confidence will also affect whether they themselves set their own agenda.

Such a focus on the important role of the individual is contrary to Lave and Wenger's view, but does support proposals that whilst opportunities for practice are important, it is the individual who ultimately chooses to engage in that practice (Billet, 2001; Evans *et al.*, 2006; Bloomer and Hodgkinson, 2000). We should note, however, that despite a less passive role for some of the members of the learning and teaching co-ordinator group, we can still see evidence of more senior staff "affording or preventing articulation and interchange amongst communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991). For example, one member of the group was excluded from a cross faculty working group by her line manager, despite the fact that all other members were included. This suggests that Lave and Wenger's assertion that the "hegemony over resources and alienation from full participation are inherent in the shaping of the legitimacy and peripherality of participation" (Lave and Wenger, 1991 p.42) does hold true, even when participants do need to be more proactive.

To summarise, my findings suggest that existing social theories of learning provide strong analytical tools for explaining learning in the workplace. However, when the community of practice is new and operating in a complex environment, we need to focus on the practice clusters across a range of communities. We also need to acknowledge that an individual member of a new community of practice will need to be proactive in seeking out access to practice clusters and resource clusters from a range of communities rather than rely on others to determine their participation.

### 6.3 Expertise

We saw above that the notion of expertise for this group did not appear to be a simple concept of moving from periphery to full participation in a community as the identification of one group of experts was not possible. In this section, I will discuss and develop the notion of expertise further, in an attempt to understand its relevance for a newly-formed, boundary crossing community.

Overall, none of the participants felt able to claim expertise in learning and teaching, partly because of the “size of the territory” (participant 2) and partly because all felt that they had more experienced colleagues who could claim a higher level of expertise in specific aspects of learning and teaching. However, several saw a possibility of being perceived as an expert in “knowing how things work” and therefore in being able to instigate activity. Part of this expertise would be knowing whose opinion counted, the knowledge of how to get ideas accepted and generally having an overview of how things work. This view of expertise links with Engestrom’s collaborative and transformative approach to expertise (Engestrom, 2004). In the “new generation” of expertise, workers are constantly involved in boundary crossing, negotiation and improvisation (Engestrom, 2004). We see many examples of this throughout the transcripts, although not all are successful. For example, in launching a Personal and Professional Development (PPD) scheme to reluctant colleagues, one participant had to draw together propositional knowledge of PPD, an understanding of who the opinion leaders were in the faculty, knowledge of what type of language/discourse to use in any documentation, how policy would be viewed, who the reluctant colleagues

would be, how to gain their trust and acceptance etc. This concept of expertise is very different to the notions of expertise focussing on technical abilities alone, but does have resonance with Eraut's view of experts as "not how much they know but their ability to use their knowledge, because that knowledge has been implicitly organised as a result of considerable experience for rapid, efficient and effective use" (Eraut, 2004, p254). It also confirms Billett's view of expertise (based on studies of vocational work) that expertise requires competence in a community's discourse (more than in technical skills), is reciprocal and requires pertinence in the appropriateness of problem solutions (Billett, 2001). Therefore, drawing upon the example above, having expert knowledge in PPD would be insufficient to claim expertise in implementing a faculty wide PPD scheme.

As a group, participants demonstrate wide ranging evidence of Eraut's (2005) concept of "networked expertise" where individuals develop skills and knowledge in relation to others with the aim of taking advantage of each other's strengths. For this group, despite having little common ground in terms of how things work within a faculty, learning from the other group members nonetheless developed from sharing experiences via stories and from sharing propositional knowledge.

#### **6.4 Chapter summary**

In this chapter, I have discussed in depth some of the main findings of my research. We are beginning to see how the complex interplay between practice and resources is important for the learning of members of a newly-formed community of practice. In particular, we can see the importance of

opportunities for practice and the proactive nature of the individual members of a new group. Organisational support and guidance that extend beyond the boundaries of the community also appear important and I have proposed that legitimate peripheral participation, as outlined by Lave and Wenger, does not account for the lack of shared understandings, mature practices and experts within a newly formed community of practice.

In the next chapter, I will work with these findings to conclude my research, initially answering the research questions developed in chapter one. I will also develop my own contribution to knowledge offering a new model of learning in the workplace.

## **Chapter Seven: Conclusions**

This chapter will draw together the work completed to conclude the thesis. It is divided into six sections. In the first, I will revisit the research questions and answer each individually. I will then outline the contribution I have made to understanding of learning in the workplace. Following reflection on the methodology used in the research, I will make recommendations for further academic research. Finally I will develop some practical recommendations for both managers and members of newly formed communities of practice in higher education.

### **7.1 Revisiting the research questions**

In chapter one, I developed a set of research questions largely derived from my own observations about a newly-formed community of practice. I also drew upon existing studies of workplace learning to guide the formation of the research questions. In this section, I will systematically answer each question in turn.

#### **7.1.1 What is being learned in a new community of practice in higher education?**

Participants in this study appear to be learning about concepts and propositions, in particular those relating to higher education policy initiatives such as personal development planning, employability and student support. These often derive from government policy initiatives and institutional drives.

In addition to propositional knowledge, participants are also learning about procedural aspects of their work context. As they engage in practice, they learn how things work in their own department, and also in the institution. In fact, they come to understand some of the “moments” identified by Trowler and Cooper (2002) in their own teaching and learning regimes (e.g., discursive repertoires, codes of signification, rules of appropriateness).

As a new group, participants in my study also appear to learn about a whole series of issues which contribute to their ability to complete the tasks required of them. For example, they learn about how to prioritise, how to cope with the territory. They learn how to build their own credibility and validate the role itself (necessary due to its newness) and how and when to draw upon policy as “clout”. They learn where to find reassurance that they are doing the right things, where to find support (both for reassurance and for motivation) and who can provide feedback on their work.

Whether they are learning to be experts is less clear. Their boundary crossing role means that any notion of expertise is not related to technical learning and teaching know-how, but rather to how to get things done: knowing whose opinion counts, how to get ideas accepted and generally having an overview of what is going on.

### **7.1.2 How is it being learned?**

Learning about relevant conceptual knowledge appears straightforward: web sites such as the Higher Education Academy, conferences, books, journals

and outside speakers provide a rich and accessible source of propositional knowledge which participants appeared to access without problem.

Learning about the way things work and how to cope with a new role seems to be less straightforward and appears to involve a complex dynamic between two elements: the practice clusters in which the participants engage, and the resources they develop as a result of this engagement, and upon which they draw for future engagement.

The practice clusters can be categorised into two groups: organisationally-derived practice clusters and agency-derived practice clusters.

Organisationally-derived practice clusters are those practices which broadly reflect the requirements of the learning and teaching co-ordinator job and include systemic, project and knowledge construction practices. As participation occurs, co-ordinators appear to also engage in a series of agency-derived practice clusters, identified as navigation, legitimisation, affirmation and motivation practice clusters. These are important practices which yield resources which can then be used for future engagement across all practice clusters. Resources resulting from engagement in practice clusters can also be categorised into two groups. Firstly, as a result of engagement, participants develop a series of knowledge resources. New conceptual knowledge is acquired, although it appears that it is rarely understood in a context free way. In addition, knowledge about how things work, whose opinion counts, the cultural and organisational context and how to get things done is also developed as a result of engagement in practice clusters. I have

categorised the second set of resources as enabling resources. Enabling resources include the support, guidance and feedback which participants can draw upon as they participate at work. Also included is confidence, which grows as new members engage in all practice clusters.

Knowledge resources may be tangible, in the form of books, web-sites or policy documents. However, they are just as likely to be intangible and remain as tacit knowledge, for example an individual's understanding of how to communicate with colleagues for best effect. Attempts may be made to make tacit understandings explicit, yet in a complex environment where different departments work in different ways, it is not always possible to create a "one size fits all" guide.

Enabling resources include some which are readily available and some which need to be proactively sought out. For example, guidance could be from other people or groups, but it could also emerge from an individual's reading of a policy document. Guidance could be given during formal, scheduled appraisals or it could be sought from a colleague, maybe even someone not closely involved in the learning and teaching co-ordinator's role. Enabling resources also exist both at individual level (notably confidence) and at the organisational level (support, guidance, feedback).

### **7.1.3 What factors affect the learning?**

I have concluded that learning in the workplace for a new community of practice is dependent upon a complex interplay between practice clusters and resource clusters in which both individual agency and organisational factors

are important. At the individual level, confidence is particularly important and this can be affected by other enabling resources such as support, guidance and feedback.

What is learned in terms of propositional knowledge is partly affected by the policy context. In particular for this new community of practice, who are responsible for instigating change in higher education, practices will often be driven by the institutional and national policy context. Examples include personal development planning, student support and employability initiatives which need to be understood by participants responsible for driving change.

How it is learned, on the other hand is affected by individual and organisational factors, and I am proposing that neither should be regarded as more or less important. At the individual level, prior knowledge and confidence will affect whether and how participants engage in the identified practice clusters. At the organisational level, the availability of resources such as the levels of support, guidance and feedback will provide different learning environments which will affect how learning takes place. Availability of other resources such as time and basic equipment will also affect how participants can engage in practice and therefore access opportunities for learning.

#### **7.1.4 Does legitimate peripheral participation offer a full explanation of the learning of a new community of practice?**

We saw in chapter six that legitimate peripheral participation did not sufficiently explain the learning of this particular new community of practice. Whilst social theories of learning undoubtedly provided helpful analytical

frameworks, legitimate peripheral participation as an explanatory tool left several gaps. For example, in a new community of practice where experts are not simply full participants in the particular community, members appear to need to be much more proactive in seeking out sources of support, guidance and feedback. Access to opportunities for practice is also much more dependent upon the individual (and their levels of confidence) than in an established community where the old-timers would largely allocate participation. A new community also has to build its credibility and validity in a way that an established community, with its mature, shared practices would not, which affects the choice of projects and how they are executed.

#### **7.1.5 What are the implications for managing the learning of the members of a new community of practice?**

My 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 develop the knowledge and enabling resources which will contribute to their learning in the work place. Those responsible for managing new communities should also be aware of the need to establish the credibility and validity of the group.

Members of a new group will need reassurance, both informal and formal, that they are carrying out their role satisfactorily. Therefore, acknowledgement of the levels of support, guidance and feedback (both informal and formal) needed by members of a new group, is important, although my study suggests that too much guidance and direction can be restrictive.

## **7.2 Contribution of the research**

My contribution to knowledge about learning in the workplace relates to understanding how a new community of practice, with no mature practices, limited shared understanding and no clear group of experts within the community learns in the workplace. Whilst previous studies have focussed upon both occupational and professional groups, few have looked at a new working group. Whilst Lave and Wenger (1991) looked at newcomers to an existing community of practice, Fuller and Unwin (2005) analysed the learning of workers who are already old-timers. Eraut (2007) did review early career working, but this was in the context of established professions such as nursing, engineering and accountancy.

Findings of my study suggest that to understand the learning of new working group it is helpful to focus upon a series of practice clusters experienced as they engage in their work. The first cluster (organisationally-derived practice cluster) relates to the functional aspects of the job, notably systemic practices, project practices and knowledge construction practices. The second cluster, (agency-derived practice cluster) which is largely hidden, in that none are articulated on a job description, includes navigation practices, legitimisation practices, affirmation practices and motivation practices. Without the learning gained from experience of the agency-derived clusters, it would be difficult (if not impossible) to complete tasks involved in the organisationally-derived clusters. For example, the group being studied are responsible for implementing the institution's learning and teaching strategy by encouraging change. Without an understanding of the appropriate communications

methods in their setting (navigation practice) and without the respect of their colleagues (legitimation practice), it is unlikely that change is going to be effected by them.

Engagement in these practice clusters in turn appears to develop and then draw upon new resource clusters. Again, two broad groups emerged: knowledge resources and enabling resources. Knowledge resources include those that can provide an understanding of concepts and theories such as books, web-sites, conferences and papers. In addition, participants in a new community of practice are also drawing upon resources which can help them develop knowledge about the cultural and organisational context, and in particular the way things work in their own and institutional context. These resources tend to develop from participation and are rarely explicit. A second set of resources has also been identified and classified as enabling resources. These are also a combination of explicit and hidden resources. For example, resources such as workspace (desk, computer etc) and time to carry out tasks are largely explicit. Guidance in the form of policy and strategy documents is also accessible and explicit. However, resources such as support from other members of the community and colleagues are largely dependent upon engagement in practice. Enabling resources may be readily available to participants or may need to be sought out as activities unfold. Table 4, below provides a typology of the practice clusters with examples of the resources drawn upon and subsequently developed as participants engage in the various practice clusters:

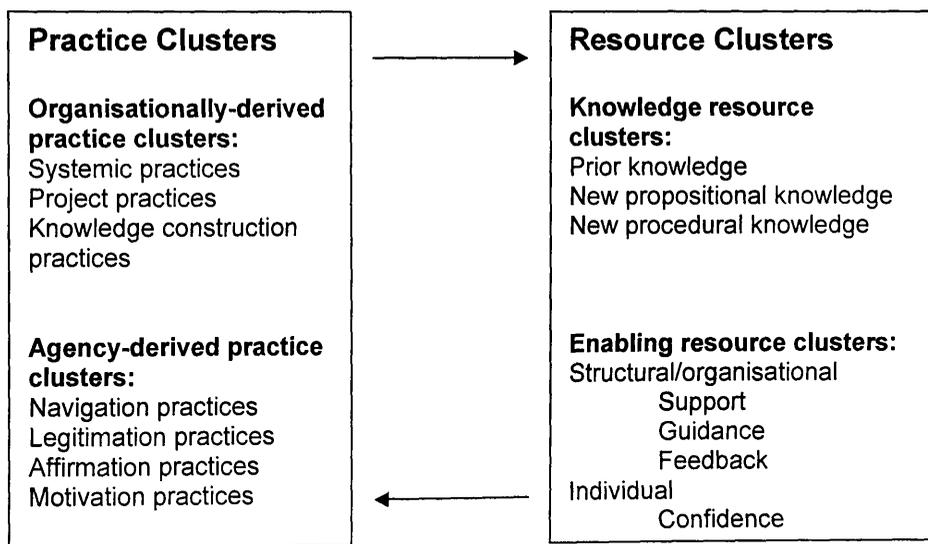
**Table 4: A Typology of Practice Clusters**

<b>Practice Clusters</b>	<b>Main focus</b>	<b>Examples of resources needed and subsequently developed</b>
<b>Organisationally-derived Practice Clusters</b>		
Systemic/routine practices	Routine tasks as outlined on a formal job description, usually common to all members of a new community. Examples include attending committees, writing reports, disseminating information	Procedural knowledge (an understanding of how to get things done), support and guidance particularly from line manager about requirements, deadlines and expectations
Project practices	Ad hoc stand-alone projects, not always common to all members of a new community, often driven by national and institutional policy. Examples include introducing new systems or schemes such as student support, personal development planning	Relevant propositional knowledge (concepts within policies), procedural knowledge (an understanding of how to get things done), an understanding of the discursive repertoires, codes of signification and rules of appropriateness as projects are undertaken; opportunities for feedback (formal and informal)
Knowledge construction practices	Developing propositional knowledge about concepts and ideas related to the role. Examples include knowledge about personal and development planning, assessment, pedagogic theory	Books, web-sites, guides, conferences
<b>Agency-derived Practice Clusters</b>		
Navigation practices	Learning how things work (at local and institutional levels), how to get things done, prioritising, understanding the "codes of signification", understanding tacit assumptions,	Policy and organisational structure (explicit information), opportunities for systemic and project practice; support in the form of policy and procedures, guidance from colleagues and managers, feedback, both formal and informal
Legitimation practices	Developing credibility and legitimacy amongst colleagues and validity within the organisation, gaining respect of colleagues, justifying the group's existence	Access to systemic and project practice; support, guidance, feedback, qualifications (masters, doctorates), opportunities to disseminate information, access to policy and funding

Affirmation practices	Gaining reassurance that the tasks required are being completed, understanding of how role fits into wider context, overcoming feelings of uncertainty	opportunities Support, guidance, feedback, in particular opportunities for "safe" informal feedback from colleagues such as regular meetings with peer group, formal appraisal, access to committee structures, key relationships with line managers, colleagues
Motivation practices	Receiving encouragement and guidance for all aspects of the role	Support, guidance, feedback, in particular key line managers and colleagues, opportunities for systemic and project practices, in particular those which allow ownership of activities

Based on these findings, I have developed a model which summarises a view of learning for a newly formed community of practice:

**Table 5: A model for understanding workplace learning for a new community of practice**



In this model, social learning theories have been embraced, although the importance of the individual has not been overlooked. I am proposing that to understand learning at work, it is helpful to focus on the practice clusters and the resource clusters developed and drawn upon by the members of a new

community of practice. Because practice clusters can cross several communities and working environments, there is a need for members to be more proactive than those in traditional and more tightly bound communities. Resources will exist in many guises and amongst diverse groups, (not only “old-timers” in the community) and as such may need to be sought out. This may be seeking out opportunities for participation, but also may involve seeking out feedback/guidance/support from inside and outside the institution. As a result, whilst social theories of learning have been embraced, I have also placed emphasis on the role of the individual and on the organisational context, particularly the “enabling resources” of support, guidance, feedback and confidence.

### **7.3 Reflections on the research**

In chapter two, I presented my rationale and justification for the methods chosen for this research. A case study approach, with an emphasis on qualitative methods was chosen to cope with the complexity at the research site. What I did not realise was just how complex this particular case study was. At every level, nothing was straightforward: the group were a new group with no established experts and no distinct ways of working; they were responsible for instigating change; the organisation was complex, with very different practices across departments; the policy context was turbulent, with new policies and funding structures constantly being introduced. However, in reviewing the data, it was possible to identify themes which were common to all group members and therefore amenable to presentation. In addition, the methodology included presenting some of the findings as individual vignettes which allowed for depth as well to illustrate specific phenomena. Whilst case

study approaches do have issues associated with validity (explored in chapter two) it is difficult to see how such a complex environment could be studied otherwise. Indeed, the case study approach certainly allowed my research to avoid a focus solely on the individual or on the workplace, thereby avoiding a potential flaw raised by Evans *et al.* (2006).

In terms of generalisability, I acknowledged in chapter two that one case study would not be generalisable across other research sites. However, as Yin (1994) would confirm, the methodology used could be employed across other sites. In addition, whilst not generalisable, the research has developed understanding and has raised issues which could be developed in future research amongst similar groups, both at the existing research site and at other higher education institutions.

In chapter two, I also raised concerns relating to my position as an insider for this research. I concluded that any disadvantages associated with my insider position would be far outweighed by the advantages of the approach.

Following the research, my view is that my position did provide me with access to participants and an ability to establish a rapport early on in the interviews. In addition, participants did not need to explain the context and background to many of the discussions as this was already familiar to me.

An advantage of the insider position was the ability to return to the participants at various stages of the research to check my understanding and probe further on specific themes. In addition, I was able to return to the whole group at a

late stage in the research to present my findings. Initial reactions to my categorisation of the practice and resource clusters were very positive, with no examples of disagreement. In fact, one participant pointed out the usefulness of the explanatory framework for student learning, suggesting a possible area for further research. This positive reaction adds to the face validity of the research and suggests that future work would benefit from a regular return to respondents, not just to check understanding, but also to develop interpretations. In this way, the reliability of the study would be strengthened.

Finally, in case there are still doubters who classify case study research as just another one-off example of a particular set of phenomena in a particular context, it is worth quoting Bloomer who advocates: "It is both practical and feasible to maintain the eclecticism of a multiplicity of perspectives for the diversity of insight and opportunity they afford" (Bloomer, 2001, p.444).

#### **7.4 Further academic research recommendations**

In higher education, there are many groups who are in a similar situation to this group of learning and teaching co-ordinators. Education technology leaders, faculty administration managers, faculty directors of undergraduate programmes, faculty widening participation champions are all groups which exist at the research site who may form a similar sample with which to compare the results of this study. During a discussion with respondents about the findings, it was suggested that the explanatory framework could also be adapted to help understand students' learning. Indeed, most groups of students new to an institution do share many of the issues associated with a newly formed professional working group. This could provide the basis for a

future research project. Research amongst professional working groups at other institutions could provide another comparison and contribute further to understanding of how new communities learn.

Whilst identity is an integral part of social learning (Wenger, 1998), and identities are formed as individuals constantly try to work out “who am I?”, I have not explicitly tackled the notion of identity in this thesis. Because I wanted to limit the scope of the study, to focus in depth on the learning of a new community, I chose not to develop thinking on identity. I was also aware that this group was not a cohesive group with necessarily a shared identity, as in recent studies of the identity of newcomers (e.g. Blaka and Filstad's, 2007 work focussed on communities of midwives and estate agents). However, this could be a logical next step and could provide the basis of future studies building on these findings.

A further area of potential research is the notion of harnessing resources. Whilst my study has highlighted some of the resources which develop as a result of engaging in a variety of practice clusters, I have not explicitly addressed the issue of harnessing those resources in the way that Saunders (2006a) suggested with regards to evaluation.

## **7.5 Practical recommendations for managers of new groups in higher education**

I have presented my recommendations to managers as a memorandum in which I draw out the key issues emerging from my research:

## Exhibit 6: Recommendations for managers of new groups in higher education

### Memorandum

*To: Academic Development Centre Manager*

*From: Deborah Anderson*

*Re: Learning in the workplace: recommendations for managing newly-formed groups*

*I have recently carried out case study research into how members of a newly formed professional group learn and develop in the role. Whilst a case study does not lead to generalisable conclusions, there are some findings which may be of interest to you as you manage similar groups across the university.*

*My research suggests that whilst the job description will provide the outline of activities the group are expected to perform, in reality they also engage in a whole series of agency-derived practices in order to be able to complete the tasks identified. With this in mind, I have categorised the practices in which they engage into "practice clusters". The organisationally-derived practice cluster comprises activities driven by the job description. These include routine tasks such as writing reports and attending committees; driving projects such as the introduction of new support systems and building their own theoretical knowledge base by reading books, papers and attending conferences. As co-ordinators engage in these organisationally-derived practice clusters, they are also engaged in a series of agency-derived practice clusters which help them to carry out the role. For example, as a new group, they need to build their own credibility and validity amongst colleagues; they need to know how to make things happen in their own environment and they need reassurance and motivation from their managers and colleagues.*

*As co-ordinators engage in the various practice clusters, they draw upon and create resources which in turn help them develop in the role. I have identified several types of resources, again categorised into clusters. The first resources relate to knowledge, of concepts, but also of how things work in their context. In addition to knowledge, co-ordinators are also drawing upon and developing a set of resources that I have categorised as enabling resources. These include support, guidance, feedback and confidence. This is an on-going process and will begin to develop a new type of*

*expertise (not one based only on conceptual knowledge, but expertise in knowing how to get things done across different contexts). As the line manager for this group, you are in a position to provide and identify sources of support, guidance and feedback for new members of the group.*

*In summary, your team will need access to conceptual knowledge via publications, web-sites and conferences. In order to instigate change, new co-ordinators will need to understand how to communicate with colleagues in their own faculty, whose opinion counts and generally how to "make things happen". They will also need to understand that they may need to build their own credibility and possibly establish their validity in the organisation. Credibility might come from enrolling on a course of formal study, but you could also contribute to this legitimisation by encouraging the publication of some of the projects undertaken via newsletters, academic papers or good practice guides. As a new group, they will need affirmation and reassurance that they are carrying out the role appropriately and as such mechanisms for both formal and informal feedback should be considered important. In particular, members of a new group appear to find the non-threatening environment of the regular co-ordinator meetings to be very valuable.*

*In summary, engagement in practice clusters, both organisationally-derived and agency-derived should result in the development of both new knowledge and new enabling resources which in turn can be drawn upon for future practice, ensuring that your team continues to learn and develop in their roles.*

*Deborah Anderson*

## **7.6 Practical recommendations for members of newly formed communities of practice**

I have chosen to present the practical recommendations for members of a newly formed community of practice as an exhibit which provides a briefing note from me. I felt this would capture some of my findings and conclusions in a practical way.

## **Exhibit 7: Briefing note for members of a newly formed community in a complex environment such as higher education**

- As a new group, it is unlikely there are established ways of working. Part of your role, in particular during the early days, will be to understand and influence the ways things work in your group.
- As the group is newly established, there are unlikely to be any experienced “experts” within the group. However, there may be experts in aspects of your job outside of the group, so it would be useful to establish who they might be and actively seek out their help.
- In order to seek guidance for your role, establish informal opportunities for discussion amongst your own colleagues but also amongst people in your role in other environments/departments/institutions.
- Actively seek out support: emotional from other people, but also structural from policy documents, committees, etc. Often, knowing how important a policy's implementation is can help provide the “clout” needed to get people to listen and get involved in your projects. This is especially true if there is funding attached.
- Establish a system of feedback, both formal and informal from colleagues and line managers
- Acknowledge the crucial role of practice as a resource and develop ways of accessing opportunities for practice. This might be via the routine tasks identified on the job description, or it might be via a focussed project designed to introduce a new scheme or system (such as student support). Engagement on a project will allow you to get to know how things work both formally and informally.
- Acknowledge that as a member of a new group you may need to establish your own and the group's credibility. This could be via qualifications, but could also develop from publication of projects, reports or guidance notes.

- Understand what expertise might mean for you (it maybe not technical, but the ability to understand how things work and how to get things done)

## **7.7 Final concluding thoughts**

In a new community of practice where there are no experts inside the community, members learn as a result of a complex dynamic of practice and resource clusters. Factors affecting engagement in practice clusters include both organisational factors (such as levels of support and guidance), the policy context (especially for groups charged with managing change) and individual factors, particularly levels of confidence. It is insufficient to focus on any one aspect; rather, studies which take into account all factors can offer a fuller understanding.

Whilst my research has identified a series of practice and resource clusters, I am not claiming that these are exhaustive. In a different group, it is likely that a completely different set of both practice and resource clusters may emerge. However, I am suggesting that analysis of the practice and resource clusters of a community of practice could provide the basis of understanding of how members of the group learn.

Word count: 43,285

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