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## **Fostering meaning: fostering community**

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### **Abstract**

This article acknowledges the value of using *communities of practice* as a perspective to illuminate learning and teaching in higher education but argues that preceding work has given insufficient attention to: the particular kinds of trajectories, commitments and intentions displayed by the participants in undergraduate courses; the knowledge practices and distinctive stances in relation to knowledge around which these ‘communities’ centre and the conceptualisation of the nature of communication and the particular challenges for the creation of meaning within higher education learning communities. It addresses these gaps by closely examining these matters and bringing to the fore the distinctiveness of learning communities in higher education. Based on this analysis it argues that effective teaching requires the creation of transitional spaces and hybrid discourses that allow for movement and change, and characterises learning communities in higher education as ‘spaces of the in-between’.

**Keywords** Communities of practice Undergraduate learning and teaching  
Student trajectories Theorising communication

### **Introduction**

*Aims and focus of the article*

Lave and Wenger's (1991) original, and Wenger's (1998) more developed, depiction of 'communities of practice' have been highly influential in research into higher education and workplace learning in recent years (Edwards 2005). At the same time the communities of practice framework has been subject to quite trenchant critique and we will consider these points of critique in a subsequent section. Our intention in this article is to steer a course between an over-ready acceptance of communities of practice as a conceptual tool and an exercise in deconstruction. In common with Lea (2005) we would wish to argue for the continuing heuristic value of communities of practice and to distance ourselves from simplistic applications of it as an educational model. We argue that communities of practice can be a useful lens through which to view learning and teaching in higher education *but* only if it is extended to take account of the features that make higher education learning and teaching environments very distinctive kinds of communities. In this article we take ahead the task of developing the communities of practice perspective to make it more fit for the purpose of illuminating the nature of HE learning communities. We note how preceding literature has given insufficient attention to three interconnected aspects of HE learning and teaching environments:

- the particular kinds of trajectories, commitments and intentions displayed by the participants in undergraduate courses;
- the knowledge practices and distinctive stance in relation to knowledge around which these 'communities' centre;

- the conceptualisation of the nature of communication and the inherent challenges of the creation of meaning within learning communities which customarily focus on abstract theoretical constructs.

We seek to develop the heuristic value of the communities of practice framework for researching HE learning and teaching by closely examining these areas of *trajectories*, *knowledge practices* and the *nature of communication* in order to bring out key matters that need to be taken into account in conceptualising HE learning communities. First though we need to set our agenda against the background of key debates concerning the value and limitations of the theoretical framework that underpins the concept of communities of practice.

## **Background**

### *A relational view of learning*

Before we turn to points of critique, it is appropriate to mark up key strengths inherent in Lave and Wenger's formulation of the concepts of situated learning and of communities of practice. Their account provided a thoroughly relational view of learning which 'emphasizes the relational interdependency of agent and world, activity, meaning, cognition, learning and knowing' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 50). They posited a dialectical relationship between the individual and her or his socially and culturally structured worlds ( Lave and Wenger, 1991, pp. 49-52), a relationship that entailed 'situated negotiation and renegotiation of meaning' (p. 51). Their theoretical framework can also be

seen to avoid a reified view of knowledge and of its commodified exchange. For both Lave (Lave, 1993; Holland and Lave, 2001) and Wenger (1998) identity and identity formation are integrally related to learning in formal and everyday settings. The advantages associated with the communities of practice perspective are succinctly summarised by Barton and Tusting (2005b, p. 3) who note that it: 'is attractive as a middle-level theory between structure and agency which is applicable to and close to actual life and which resonates with detailed ethnographic accounts of how learning happens. It has proved useful as a theory and has been of value in practice.'

*Too homogeneous a view of learning and learners?*

Moving to consider areas of perceived weakness, one set of criticisms centres on the fact that communities of practice tend to have been portrayed in ways which emphasise consensus rather than conflict, homogeneity rather than difference and dynamism, and boundedness rather than openness and permeability (Trowler, 2008, p. 53). Researchers such as Billett and Hodkinson argue that more recognition needs to be given to the agency of individual learners and to the dispositions, life history and personal construals that they bring to a particular community of practice (Billett, 2007; Hodkinson, 2007).

Here it is necessary to recognise a considerable shift over time in Wenger's writings towards a more dynamic conceptualisation of communities of practice. In *Digital Habitats* published in 2009 one can see a movement towards viewing communities of practice as more dynamic and open systems with permeable boundaries (Wenger, White, Smith, 2009). In this text,

individuals' 'multimembership' in many different communities is seen as injecting an element of dynamism as individual members of a community bring with them different purposes and patterns of participation (pp. 89-93). This more open and fluid conception of a community of practice strikes us as a more appropriate tool for thinking about and researching learning 'communities' in higher education than earlier formulations of the concept.

Even allowing for this shift towards a more fluid conception of communities marked by 'multimembership', the lack of sufficient attention to the heterogeneity of motives, experiences and trajectories of the members of a community can be seen as a significant weakness. In a following section, we set out to give a more differentiated picture of the *commitments, intentions and trajectories* displayed by participants in undergraduate courses.

#### *Power, agency, knowledge practices*

A commonly occurring point of critique, (e.g., Contu and Wilmott, 2003: Fuller *et al.*, 2005) is that insufficient account has been taken of the nature and effects of power relations within communities. For example, the literature on communities of practice in higher education has given scant consideration to the role of lecturers as assessors and gatekeepers. A related point of critique concerns the failure to give sufficient weight to the way in which local communities may be constrained as well as enabled by the institutional contexts in which they are nested (James, 2007, p. 140), or indeed by national and global sources (Fuller *et al.*, 2005, p. 64).

Attention to power relations within communities is a particularly salient matter for 21<sup>st</sup> century universities that often have a diverse and multicultural

student body, prompting questions about whose voices are heard and how mutual respect and equity of treatment can be fostered. In such settings it would seem apposite to bear in mind Lukes' observation that there is a need to 'address power among multiple actors with divergent interests' (2005, pp. 64-5).

A broad definition of power would also seem necessary to capture different facets of university learning communities. On the one hand there is a requirement to consider what Holland *et al.* have described as 'positional identities' which 'have to do with the day-to-day and on-the-ground relations of power, deference and entitlement, social affiliation and distance – with the social-interactive, social-relational structures of the lived world.' (1998, p. 127). At the same time, there can be seen to be another aspect of power which is central to university learning communities, that is the extent to which they increase students' power to think, feel and act. Do they foster the knowledge practices, skills and dispositions which can enhance individuals' agency? It is this aspect of power which we foreground in this article, presenting in the section *the knowledge practices around which academic communities centre* a conceptualisation of agency which gives central place to the cultural resources that communities make available to learners.

#### *How is communication theorised?*

Another frequently expressed dissatisfaction with the communities of practice framework, has been its lack of sustained attention to language and literacies; and to the ways in which language and access to discourses intersect with issues of power, resistance and marginality (Barton and Tusting, 2005a). While Wenger's (1998) text can be seen to foreground the negotiation of

meaning within communities of practice, the processes by which this negotiation is achieved are not specified in detail. The final section of our article addresses this underdeveloped aspect of the communities of practice literature. It draws on Rommetveit's work to present a conceptualisation of the nature of communication and the creation of meaning within learning communities that would seem to be particularly apposite to higher education settings.

### **Students' commitments, intentions, trajectories**

We turn now to look at the first of the areas which we have indicated require closer scrutiny if the communities of practice framework is to serve as a useful means of conceptualising and researching higher education learning and teaching environments: the commitments, intentions and trajectories displayed by participants in undergraduate courses.

Looking first at a strength of the communities of practice perspective, it enables researchers to conceptualise the interplay between processes of participation in undergraduate learning communities and the development of learners' identities in ways which help to answer questions about the quality of students' commitment to their academic disciplines. Why does a particular student become deeply engaged with a specific subject area? Why do some students come to reach the point of commitment to their subject areas where they feel willing to form and defend their own reasoned perspectives within



the traditions of a particular academic discipline while others do not reach this point?

McCune (2009), for example, used communities of practice as an heuristic to make sense of the ways in which final year undergraduate biosciences students from three institutions spoke about their willingness to engage actively with their studies. There appeared to be an interplay between: experiences which were perceived by students as authentic and legitimate participation in scientific work; coming to identify more as 'scientists' and less as 'students'; and having a willingness to take critical perspectives on academic content.

The communities of practice perspective helped to frame these findings in terms of students developing inbound trajectories through legitimate participation in a way that made sense of the quality of their critical engagement with this particular subject area. The students were not, however, an homogenous group. Their capacity for agency in relation to the subject area was shaped by their particular past experiences and the nature of their identification with the subject.

Another research project pointed up how students' commitments to their university work could not necessarily be seen in terms of a straightforward inward trajectory but rather were influenced by a wider nexus of membership and past experiences. This project looked at students making the transition from further education into an 'elite' Scottish university (McCune *et al.*, 2010). Differences were evident between the intentions of the mature and younger students in relation to their studies. The mature students were often studying topics that related to work communities they had previously

experienced and to which they would return after their studies were complete. This gave the mature students a much richer grasp of the relevance and implications of what they were learning in relation to their intended future trajectories within particular communities of practice which gives a sense again of students as purposive agents shaped by their prior experiences, rather than an homogenous student cohort.

Wenger's (1998) notion of identity as a nexus of multimembership of different communities was also very relevant to understanding the commitments of the students from this project. The students were negotiating the tensions between participation in academic communities and the expectations of the communities which shaped their wider lives which involved particular perspectives relating to class, gender and ethnicity (Christie *et al.*, 2008; McCune *et al.*, 2010). Thus, the communities of practice heuristic was not the only possibility for making sense of the commitments and intentions of these students, as both the particularities of individual biographies and wider sociocultural perspectives were important in analysing the students' accounts (Christie *et al.*, 2008; McCune *et al.*, 2010).

Both the work with biosciences students and the research into students making the transition from further education to higher education touched on a distinctive aspect of the trajectories which students experience in relation to learning communities in higher education. Rather than students developing trajectories in relation to a specific community within which they will remain, undergraduate programmes involve time-limited engagement in learning communities which overlap with, and/or serve as preparation for, participation in diverse future workplace communities. This is important as it renders more

complex the interplay between what is learned through participation and the identification with the practices of a particular future workplace community which would make this learning meaningful. Fostering outward trajectories from undergraduate programmes can be problematic.

An example of this can be found in the consternation expressed by first year undergraduate biosciences students, reported by Hounsell *et al.* (2008), when they encountered assessments which seemed irrelevant for them as they did not have sufficient grasp of the practices of possible future communities to see the assessments as authentic. This example points up the need for the authenticity and value of learning tasks to be more explicitly established with learners in higher education rather than assumed, (as may be the case when the learning takes places within the exact setting for which it is intended).

Staying within HE learning-teaching environments themselves, a limitation of the communities of practice perspective is that it does not give a clear sense of the general qualities of engagement which might be required of students and staff for higher learning to take place. Barnett (2007) indicates the importance of the dispositions which students and lecturers must bring to their shared endeavours if students are to develop the capacity to act effectively in a world where it is increasingly difficult to hold a clear and uncontested sense of how to be and how to act with conviction. He emphasises the value of students and staff working together to engage with the uncertainties and limitations of academic understanding in a spirit of humility, criticality and resilience. This goes far beyond Wenger's account of different levels of participation in communities of practice to describe particular qualities and forms of participation which may be required.

Barnett draws on the work of Nussbaum (1997) in considering the pedagogical approaches which might be best suited to developing in students the capacity to take a reasoned stance in the face of conflicting viewpoints and to hold it with conviction. Nussbaum (1997) writes convincingly of the importance of students becoming actively engaged in processes of argumentation whereby their beliefs are made subject to logical and critical scrutiny. She encourages the creation of a learning culture within which students can engage in reasoned debate around competing and controversial perspectives rather than simply trading assertion and counter-assertion. Nussbaum also emphasises the importance of training students' 'narrative imagination' (1997, p. 10) such that they have a strong capacity to grasp the meanings that someone quite different from themselves might develop and how that person might feel in their particular context.

Her work thus signals the importance of more expansive perspectives on learner engagement which go beyond situated consideration of the practices of specific academic communities, while not denying the importance of the traditions of thought of particular academic disciplines. Drawing on both Nussbaum and Sen, Walker (2010) expands on the value of education for criticality and social responsibility for all students regardless of their disciplinary backgrounds. Discursive pedagogies which enable students to deeply consider social justice and to reflect on how their education can contribute to equality are central to Walker's analysis.

Whereas Wenger (1998) focuses on how commitment to learning may grow through legitimate peripheral participation and inbound trajectories in relation to communities of practice, hooks (1994) emphasises the importance of

theorisation and communication which transcend the boundaries of particular communities. She points up the importance of theorisation and writing which is accessible across multiple communities and gives examples of how this has been possible with her written work.

Drawing on hooks, Adds *et al.* (2011) note how bringing aspects of Māori culture and practice into the academy to transform the practices of academic communities – rather than expecting students simply to assimilate to the practices of academic communities – can result in more transformative and authentic learning experiences for Māori and other students. These examples present a possible challenge to the emphasis in the communities of practice tradition on commitment and action developing through deepening participation in, and identification with, a particular focused community but sit more comfortably with the more open and fluid accounts of communities of practice described by Wenger, White and Smith (2009). hooks' (1994) work also opens up the possibility that too great an emphasis on students' commitment to learning particular forms of theorisation within specific academic communities may draw energy and engagement away from the use of theorisation for wider social change.

In this section we have noted how consonant Wenger's (1998) conception of identity as a nexus of multi-membership of different communities is with the situation of undergraduates who can be seen to occupy a space between the communities that have shaped their lives and possible future trajectories. At the same time, however, we have highlighted limitations in the communities of practice heuristic as a means of examining students' commitments and intentions in relation to their studies, including the lack of attention that has

been given within this perspective to the cultivation of the *dispositions* and qualities of engagement that may be required of staff and students. Focusing on the situated practices of learning communities may also deflect attention from the goals of developing students' intellectual and imaginative capacities to transcend the viewpoints and forms of thinking of particular communities and of fostering wider civic engagement.

### **The knowledge practices around which academic communities centre**

The relational view of learning espoused by Lave and Wenger (1991) enables us to understand why even very capable students may struggle with transitions to new learning contexts (Cotterall, 2011) and why it is so often difficult for students to grasp fully what makes for high quality academic work (Cotterall, 2011; Hounsell et al., 2008). Within situated learning perspectives, academic knowledge and skills can be understood to be interdependent and evolving facets of socially and culturally constructed worlds, rather than reified commodities which can be readily absorbed by students. Students are working to find effective ways of participating within particular knowledge practices, rather than applying straightforwardly transferable generic skills and knowledge.

For students to produce high-quality academic work they must become able to participate effectively in the *ways of thinking and practising (WTPs)* of academic communities (McCune and Hounsell, 2005; Anderson and Hounsell, 2007). These WTPs encompass the tacit norms and practices of

academic communities as well as their histories of debate and perspectives on knowledge. These practices may be grasped gradually through participation, rather than it being possible to explain them immediately to new participants in a community, a point we expand on in following paragraphs.

In appropriating these WTPs to a degree, students may also be gaining aspects of their power. In a recent publication (Anderson & McCune in press) we have considered how best to conceptualise agency and its development within higher education teaching-learning communities. We have argued there that the socio-cultural theorist Wertsch (1991) provides a conceptualisation of agency that is fit for this purpose. Wertsch gives central place in the conceptualisation of agency to the cultural resources that are made available to a learner; and notes how in gaining mastery over a particular cultural tool, one may appropriate aspects of its power (1991, p. 138). At the same time he recognises that cultural tools 'are not neutral cognitive instruments existing outside relations of power and authority' (pp. 146-147) and that gaining skill in their use may not be free from conflict or resistance.

Such processes of appropriation, whether smooth or conflictual, can take a considerable period of time, as the research with final year biosciences students, introduced earlier, illustrates (McCune and Hounsell, 2005; McCune, 2009). Despite three or four years of study, these students were still working toward more sophisticated perspectives on what was involved in developing legitimate knowledge and understanding within the multiple and overlapping communities which comprise the biosciences. These successful and experienced students were building richer perspectives on how to communicate effectively within these contexts but were by no means fully

expert. They spoke of how the communicative demands shifted as they engaged with different sub-groups within their communities, rather than them having grasped generic skills of oral and written communication which could be reused straightforwardly across contexts (McCune and Hounsell, 2005). The findings from these studies illustrate the gradual development of understanding of knowledge practices through participation and emphasise the importance of the integral connections between identity formation and learning as described by Wenger (1998).

Following Wenger (1998), Anderson and Hounsell (2007) stress the importance of lecturers sharing an authentic 'lived engagement' (p.471) with the subject such that they can act as energising representatives of their academic communities. This speaks again to the distinctiveness of learning communities in higher education where students are not directly participating in the multiple possible future communities to which their trajectories relate. Were the students and lecturers simply working together within a single community for the long term fewer teaching challenges would be likely to arise. Against this backdrop where full enculturation by immersion cannot be assumed, lecturers can then endeavour to make explicit for students how to practise within their area and can model appropriate reasoning processes to aid students' development. Students can be gradually drawn into engaging in relevant debates and academic staff can scaffold their attempts at effective participation. Courses can be designed with the aim of enabling students to engage in appropriate ways of thinking and practising.

Anderson and Hounsell (2007) note another feature of academic communities which is not well addressed by the general formulations of communities of



practice as an heuristic for understanding learning. They draw attention to the particular ways in which students are expected to orient themselves towards the knowledge of academic communities. Students in academic communities are encouraged to take particular ‘epistemological orientations’ (p. 469) in which knowledge is problematised rather than seen as reified and established content to be learned. Thus even novice participants are often actively encouraged to take a questioning approach toward the community with which they are beginning to engage. This entails not a straightforward ‘entry’ into a community but both engagement with, and a certain reflective detachment from, its practices. Returning to the question of power raised earlier, such a positioning of students clearly means that they are not simply being ‘disciplined’ but are expected themselves to display agency in the use, and a critical scrutiny, of the knowledge and strategies that they are encountering. This positioning *above*, as well as within, a particular academic community that can be seen to be central to the development of students’ criticality has not to our mind been given due weight in preceding higher education research and theorising that has deployed the communities of practice heuristic.

### **Spaces of the ‘in-between’: communicating and creating meaning**

In his 1998 book Wenger gives central place to the *negotiation of meaning* which he views as ‘at once both historical and dynamic, contextual and unique’ (p. 54). For Wenger, this negotiation of meaning rests on the

complementary, intricately intertwined processes of *participation* and *reification*. While this duality can be seen to capture well the interpenetration of the dynamic and more static facets of language and representation, it appears to us still to rest on a view of communication where language is treated as a fairly transparent medium of exchange.

Such an assumption of transparency does not accord well with the rejection by many linguists of the position that there are stable, literal meanings for individual words and larger language units (e.g. Gee, 2008; Prior, 1998). A move away from the positing of stable, transparent meanings, as Trowler (2008, p. 31) has acknowledged, ‘problematizes assumptions about mutuality of interpretation and understanding.’ A clear sense of what may be at stake in creating conditions for sufficient mutuality of understanding to be constructed emerges from Ragnar Rommetveit’s subtle, complex account of how meaning can be achieved to a degree against the background of a ‘world we assume to be multifaceted, only partly shared and only fragmentarily known’ (Rommetveit, 1974, p. 34).

### *Semantic potentialities of language*

Rejecting the ‘myth of literal meaning’ (Rommetveit, 1988, p. 13) and regarding everyday language as ‘semantically open and embedded in “the stream of life” ’ (1979, p. 159), he focuses on the *semantic potentialities* of language.

On such a view of language as a system of meaning potentials, interactants, (who will bring different knowledge and experiences to an act of communication), need to engage in an active process of sense making, not simply transmit or decode messages. Rommetveit, however, does not cast us adrift into a wholly relativistic universe of meaning. He notes how:

The semantic system inherent in our everyday language is *orderly* and *borders on our knowledge of the world*, yet *ambiguous* and open. The order exists in the form of *constraints upon semantic potentialities*, however, and not in unequivocal “literal meanings” (1979, p. 153)

Constraints on meaning potentials derive in part from the shaping effects of a context, ‘where “context” entails intersubjective contracts, ongoing discourse and a horizon of background experience’ (Hanks, 1996, p. 86). Consonant with a view of communities of practice as dynamic sites for the negotiation of meaning, the contexts in which meanings can emerge have to be created to a considerable degree by the efforts of the participants. Meaning is portrayed as a dialogical construction: ‘Commonality is established when two persons construct a temporarily shared world by engaging in dialogue. This involves a coordination of both attention and intention’ (Farr and Rommetveit, 1995, p. 271).

Rommetveit acknowledges the relative fixation of meaning that occurs within ‘highly specialized technological, professional and scientific terminologies’ (1992, p. 23). However, this process of creating more decontextualized, monological terminologies cannot be construed as the production of ‘literal’

meanings in academic domains that then can be readily transmitted to students. Rather this comparative fixity of meaning is achieved through what Linell has characterised as ‘situated decontextualizing practices’ (Linell, 1992, p. 258f.).

The task then is not straightforwardly to provide students with a fixed academic vocabulary but to assist them to unpack these ‘situated decontextualizing practices’ and to participate to a degree in the discursive repertoires of particular academic domains.

Bringing students into the discursive repertoire of an academic domain may best be achieved by deploying what can be described as ‘hybrid’ discourses. Making this point more concrete, skilful lecturing and tutoring can be seen to call for adept translation that involves ‘an interplay between *taking out* an expert’s view of a subject to students, in terms that novices are likely to understand, and *drawing in* students’ [everyday lexis and] more common-sense understandings towards expert positions within the discipline’ (Anderson, 1997, p.192).

Turning to illustrate these processes, interpenetration of discourses is evident, for example, in the following quotation from an undergraduate expressing approval for university tutors ‘whose talk constructs a space within which students can think’ (Anderson, 1997. p. 191).

It’s nice when it’s .. , it is built upon and twisted around and things. It gives you room for thought.’ (*ibid.*)

A similarly active effort to achieve a sufficiently common meaning and perspective is revealed in the following extract from an interview with another student:

Often you sort of say something and it's a bit unclear. So, it's nice for them to sort of help *them* sort out what you mean, and help yourself sort out what *you* mean. (*ibid.*)

A reformulating 'translation', (that attends closely to the essence of what a student has said), into the more formal discourse of a discipline is illustrated in the following extract from an undergraduate tutorial in social history:

**Student:** I think is it not to give them a bit more say so that they don't. That they're not going to be sort of easily exploited all the time.

**Tutor:** Right, so they are really looking for a re-distribution of power in one way or another. Right. Or they are objecting to the way power is distributed. [not previously published data]

*Intersubjectivity: fostering the appropriation of meaning*

The need to work actively to achieve sufficiently common understanding is given added force when one takes account of the central role that Rommetveit gives to *perspectivity* in the creation and sharing of meaning, seeing 'that the

very identity of any given state of affairs is contingent upon the position from which it is viewed' (1990, p. 87). Achieving a sufficient sharing of meaning between lecturers and students requires newcomers to a domain to enter into the frames of knowledge within which topics are to be construed, to begin to gain a sense of the context of meaning-making within a particular disciplinary or professional community. The challenge of assimilating new knowledge in tandem with the perspectives from which this knowledge needs to be viewed can be seen as a principal reason why in higher education settings states of intersubjectivity of the type that Rommetveit (1974) described may be particularly 'difficult to achieve and easily disintegrate' (Northedge and McArthur, 2009, p. 113). Northedge and McArthur observe that: 'disciplinary discourses offer sparse resources for sharing meaning, so that the teacher's words may fail to generate a shared flow of meaning at the outset' (*ibid.*). Northedge himself (2003, a, b) has clearly set out general strategies for increasing the potential for intersubjectivity between academics and students, and has given detailed illustrations of how these general strategies can be put into effect.

While Rommetveit's work may point up the fragility of intersubjectivity in higher education learning communities, his emphasis on the semantic potential of language can be regarded as a source of pedagogic hope and inspiration, allowing as it does for meaning and understanding to be created, rather than lost, in translation. Guided by an assumption of the indeterminacy of discourse, Newman, Griffin and Cole in *The Construction Zone* (1989) noted how such indeterminacy 'leaves room for movement and change' (p. 11) and that:

*Just as the children do not have to know the full cultural analysis of a tool to begin using it, the teacher does not have to have a complete analysis of the children's understanding of the situation to start using their actions in the larger system.* [italics in original] (p. 63)

A similar claim can be made concerning learning and teaching in higher education. Rather than seeing entry into disciplinary practices in terms of a unidirectional process of enculturation, it may make sense to view effective teaching as requiring the creation of transitional spaces and hybrid discourses that allow for 'movement and change.'

### **The distinctive nature of higher education learning communities as spaces of the in-between**

In this paper we have acknowledged the heuristic power of the communities of practice perspective but we have also pointed up distinctive features of undergraduate learning communities in higher education. We have argued that these features need to be given central attention when the communities of practice framework is deployed to conceptualise undergraduate learning and teaching.

Pursuing a more nuanced view of communities of practice, we note that in addition to capturing the complexities of communication in higher education learning communities, Rommetveit's work (1992, 2003) resonates with some

recent writings on social science methods that have attempted to move beyond assumptions of ontological universalism while at the same time avoiding a retreat into solipsism. In this vein, Law (2004, p. 61), for example, observes that:

... the absence of singularity does not imply that we live in a world composed of an indefinite number of different and disconnected bodies ... It does not imply that reality is fragmented. Instead it implies something much more complex. It implies that the different realities *overlap and interfere with one another*. Their relations, partially co-ordinated, are complex and messy ...

Such an ontology of the 'in-between' (Law, 2004, p. 63), of partial connections, strikes us as an appropriate way in which to frame understanding of the distinctive nature of learning communities in higher education and of the challenges that lecturers face in fostering students' learning. An emphasis on the 'in-betweenness' of meaning can be seen to focus attention on the need to *create* sufficient common reference from different initial experiences, knowledge and perspectives; the possibility of such an exercise; but also the limits on achieving common reference in a world of partial connections.

We argue that these challenges are particularly salient for undergraduate learning communities in higher education where learners are placed in a time-limited manner within the same learning community but with multiple possible future trajectories which may not yet be clearly imagined by the learner. Further complexity is added by the particular detached stance students may be



asked to take in relation to knowledge and the importance of their being able to engage across the boundaries of multiple subject area communities. The abstract and theoretical nature of much of what is learned in higher education communities brings a further layer of challenge to the ongoing process of establishing meaning and shared frames of reference to allow learning to take place.

Another aspect of higher education learning communities as spaces of the in-between can be identified. We have noted earlier the diverse, multicultural nature of many campuses; and if learning communities are to be truly spaces of the in-between in the terms of productive cultural interchange there is a clear need to act to reduce the likelihood that particular groups of students are ‘othered’ in direct, or possibly much more subtle, ways. Practical pointers on how to achieve more inclusive communities are provided in publications from Thomas and May (2010) on learning and teaching, and by Arshad and her colleagues in relation to race (Universities Scotland, 2010).

A connection between university learning communities as discursive spaces of the in-between and as socially and culturally inclusive spaces is signalled in Ahmed’s (2012) incisive, minute dissection of the language of diversity and its relationship to university policies and practice. She points up the importance of ‘the creation of a space in which we could talk about the words themselves [e.g., diversity, equality, whiteness and racism]’ and of allowing ‘diversity to be shared as a question.’ (Ahmed, 2012, p. 81).

Against the background we have sketched of the need to create transitional spaces, hybrid discourses and inclusive communities, we contend that a strong focus on ontologies and pedagogies of the in-between is fundamentally

important for research and development in relation to learning communities in higher education.

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