



Chasms and bridges: Generativity in the space between educators' communities of practice

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ABSTRACT

This article presents findings from an ethnographic study that explored how participation in an educator network contributed to the production of meaning, identity, and agency among the teachers and school district administrators involved. Prominent in this process were the differences between practice in the network, consisting of dialogue informed by theory, inquiry, and reflection on professional experience, and the practice of participants' workplace communities. I argue that identities afforded by multi-membership in these very different communities, along with the bridges participants worked to build between the communities, hold promise for generating change in the field of education.

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, organised networks of teachers and other educators who convene for professional development, inquiry, or school improvement have become prominent avenues through which educational change is pursued in the U.S. (e.g., Adams, 2000; Lieberman & Wood, 2003; Pennell & Firestone, 1996), the U.K. (e.g., Day & Hadfield, 2005; Frankham, 2006; McGregor, 2007), and throughout Europe (e.g., Autio & Ropo, 2005; Rué, 2005; Veugelers & O'Hair, 2005; Veugelers & Zijlstra, 2005). In research on professional development in education, 'network' invokes an image akin to Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of community of practice. Many professional development networks, for example, are premised on an understanding that teacher learning should take place in collegial communities that encourage active participation, support social interaction, and endure over time (see, e.g., Adams, 2000; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996, 2005; Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992; Lieberman & Wood, 2003; Little, 1993). It is not surprising, then, that researchers studying organised networks¹ as contexts for teacher learning and change

have used "community of practice" both as a descriptor for networks and to signal their advantages over traditional professional development experiences (e.g., Freedman, 2005; Lieberman & Miller, 2008; Lieberman & Wood, 2003; Niesz, 2007; Veugelers & O'Hair, 2005). The comparison made between the value of network participation and the limitations of traditional 'one-shot' approaches to professional development reflects the arguments that Lave and Wenger make about learning: we learn, grow, and change through sustained practice/situated activity in communities (see also Lave, 1988, 1996; Wenger, 1998).

The community of practice concept is thus a natural fit for research on networks as contexts for teacher learning. Despite this alignment, however, Lave and Wenger's (1991) work tends not to be used as a lens for the ethnographic study of how educators' participation in networks manifests as learning and change. Lave and Wenger's discussion of learning through apprenticeship explores how identities are transformed through participation in communities of practice. Although the educator network literature makes reference to identity and transformation, we have not seen ethnographic accounts that depict how shared practice in networks generates identities and, potentially, changed communities of practice.

The question of how practice in communities is generative relative to educators' identities and practice was at the centre of the study discussed in this article. In what follows, I discuss findings from ethnographic research on an educator network designed for participants' professional development as educational leaders. In this research, I sought to understand how practice within the network community influenced participants' professional

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¹ My use of "organised" is intended to distinguish networks that are organised for professional development, inquiry, and/or school improvement from informal social networks of educators that emerge organically (see Pennell & Riel, 2007, for an overview of a social network analysis approach to these informal teacher networks). Also, in this article I am referring to networks of educators who meet face-to-face at least some of the time, as opposed to electronic or on-line networks.

identities and their practice beyond the network, in their school and district workplaces.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Practice theory and generativity

As many have observed, Lave and Wenger's (1991) concepts of "community of practice" and "legitimate peripheral participation" have influenced a broad range of disciplines and fields of inquiry (Barton & Tusting, 2005; Haneda, 2006; Lea, 2005). Indeed, one outcome of the great success of *Situated Learning* is that its ideas are often taken up in projects that do not share the theoretical roots and questions of the original work. What sometimes gets lost in the embrace of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) as a theory of learning is attention to some of the broader questions of social practice theory, questions that are of particular interest to anthropologists.

According to Lave and Wenger (1991), their work formulates

a theory of learning as a dimension of social practice. Indeed, the concept of legitimate peripheral participation provides a framework for bringing together theories of situated activity and theories about the production and reproduction of the social order. These have usually been treated separately, and within distinct theoretical traditions. But there is common ground for exploring their integral, constitutive relations, their entailments, and effects in a framework of social practice theory, in which the production, transformation, and change in the identities of persons, knowledgeable skill in practice, and communities of practice are realized in the lived-in world of engagement in everyday activity. (p. 47)

As an innovation in practice theory that develops learning "as the historical production, transformation, and change of persons" (p. 51), this work provides a way to understand how the social order is made and remade in situated activity. Sherry Ortner (1994) describes this as a two-way process, noting that

modern practice theory seeks to explain the relationship(s) that obtain between human action, on the one hand, and some global entity which we may call 'the system' on the other. Questions concerning these relationships may go in either direction—the impact of the system on practice, and the impact of practice on the system. (Ortner, 1994, p. 392)²

The notion of *generativity* is thus a central theme in social practice theories. Generativity refers to how identities, practices, cultural forms—and ultimately 'the system'—are produced in situated activity (see, e.g., Holland & Lave, 2001). The theoretical development of legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice provides a concrete vision of how this happens as newcomers become old-timers through changing participation in situated practice. As Lave and Wenger (1991) point out, the generation of identities and the generation of communities are two sides of the same process. "Legitimate peripheral participation is intended as a conceptual bridge—as a claim about the common processes inherent in the production of changing persons and changing communities of practice" (p. 55).

² A comprehensive treatment of practice theory is beyond the scope of this paper, but see Ortner (1994, 2006), Holland and Eisenhart (1990), and Erickson (2001) for overviews.

2.2. Identities and change across communities of practice

As valuable as Lave and Wenger's (1991) work is to understanding change in identities and communities that happens generationally, as newcomers become old-timers within a *single* community of practice, it does not attend to practice beyond the community's borders. Timmons Flores (2007) notes that the original articulation of LPP does not "consider the abilities or experiences that practitioners bring to the setting that may influence individual development nor does it consider movement across multiple activity settings" (pp. 398–399). Others, too, have noted that the community of practice concept often gets taken up as if communities are in a vacuum, distinct from other social contexts (Barton & Tusting, 2005). Researchers have been called to conceptualise how communities of practice overlap with others, as well as how broader contexts inform practice in local communities (Barton & Tusting; Lea, 2005; Timmons Flores, 2007).

Perhaps as a response to such concerns about the community of practice concept (Haneda, 2006), Etienne Wenger (1998) later developed concepts of *multimembership*, how we belong to multiple communities of practice, and *reconciliation*, how we manage the competing demands from our various communities of practice in the formation of our identities. Wenger posits that identity "should be viewed as a nexus of multimembership" (p. 159).

Multimembership and reconciliation proved important in my own research on a network of educators that became a community of practice. In addition to their participation in the network, participants were also members (in a much more everyday way) of other communities of practice, those located in the schools and districts that employed them. Ultimately, it was the differences between these two communities—differences in their practice, differences in the identities afforded and constructed through practice—and the bridges built between them that seemed to hold the most promise for generating change.

3. The Democracy Collective Practitioner Cohort and the study

This article presents an analysis of data collected for a larger ethnographic study that explored how participation in an educator network provided a context for the (cultural) production of meaning, identity, practice, and agency among participating teachers and school district administrators. The network, which I am calling the Democracy Collective,^{3,4} is based upon a particular theoretical articulation of how schooling should be practised and how professional educators can work toward that vision. The vision of the Democracy Collective (DC) is informed by John Dewey's work on education and democratic living, among that of other philosophers and scholars in the field of Curriculum Studies. I selected this network as a context for my study because I was interested in pursuing research in the context of a community committed to what I viewed as a progressive vision of education. I found several aspects of the DC's vision compelling in this regard, including its theme

³ "Democracy Collective" and all names of individuals are pseudonyms. In order to protect the anonymity of the group, identifying information, including the literature articulating the specific vision central to the group's existence, is not revealed here. Because the leaders of the DC were authors of the book articulating the underlying conceptualisations that formed the basis of the DC, it is impossible to describe the group's vision without compromising commitments to maintain confidentiality in the research.

⁴ I am defining an educator network as an organised group of educators who convene over time for purposes related to learning/professional development, inquiry, and/or support for innovation, school improvement, or broader education-related change. The DC is a network under this definition. However, members of the DC did not use the label of "network" to refer to the group. Occasionally, participants referred to their group as a "professional learning community."

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