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Legitimizing processes: Barriers and facilitators for experienced Newcomers' entry transitions to knowledge practices

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ABSTRACT

In the situated learning literature the apprenticeship-model based legitimate peripheral participation process has been widely adopted to explain the entry of novices to existing knowledge practices. To date however, little has been established about the role of legitimizing processes in experienced newcomers' entry transitions to existing knowledge practices. This paper reports two qualitative studies where more arduous and challenging transitions emerged for experienced newcomers than for novices, in legitimizing processes, relations with others and professional identity contextualization. The research finds that experienced newcomers' entry transitions are more complex than the legitimate peripheral participation process suggests, and that while Wenger's (1998) dualities model provides additional explanatory power, more is needed to understand experienced workers' entry transitions. An expanded model is suggested incorporating these complexities. The paper addresses a gap in the literature and establishes the contribution of legitimizing processes for experienced newcomers' progression to full participation in an existing workgroup.

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1. Introduction

Experienced practitioners are the most usual type of new entrant to workgroups for their established expertise, informed perspectives, individual professional reputation or to advance collective practices (Carr, Pearson, Vest, & Boyar, 2006). In the situated learning literature the apprenticeship-model based legitimate peripheral participation process has been widely adopted to explain the entry of novices to existing knowledge practices. Lave and Wenger (1991) described a process of legitimate peripheral participation or gradual advancement of new entrants from the periphery to a legitimized position of developed practical, technical and conceptual expertise, acceptance, and contribution at the core of the specific knowledge practice community, which has achieved pre-eminence in the situated learning literature.

This process suggests an apprenticeship-based, generic, linear pathway that is insufficient to explain experienced new entrants' clearly differing kinds of transitions. The embedded, collaborative, practice nature of knowledge (Rennstam & Ashcraft, 2014) makes these differences important for experienced newcomers' early engagement, effective contribution and collective advancement. The entry contexts and commencement roles of experienced and novice newcomers provide obvious variances, for instance, novices usually bring formal foundational training and basic general practices, to be shaped by their initial professional engagement in a knowledge community.

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Experienced newcomers bring existing modes of practice, mental models, organizational perspectives, cultural training (Carr et al., 2006), personal reputations (Zinko, Ferris, Blass, & Laird, 2007) and professional identities (Brown, 2014) developed in other practice settings. Their attributes may impact on or be oppositional to established structures, practices and understandings in their new setting (Groysberg, Lee, & Abrahams, 2010) in nuanced, complex ways. These may influence the development of shared meaning (Sadler-Smith, 2008) and even generate counter-productive responses among new colleagues (Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Rubenstein, & Zhaoli, 2013; Mørk, Hoholm, Ellingsen, Edwin, & Aanestad, 2010) in both obvious and more subtle, unexpected ways, impeding legitimation.

Subsequently, Wenger (1998) elaborated three requirements for legitimation and recognition of 'competent membership' as (i) the ability to participate in and engage the community's relationships; (ii) accepting responsibility for and contributing to the community's practices and (iii) capacity to meaningfully adopt and enact the community's understandings and practices (pp. 136–137), thereby establishing the pre-eminence of the existing routines and political power of the community's membership-in-place. Wenger (1998) described participation and reification (the community's meaning representations adopted by all members as the basis for reality and action) as fundamental to the successful assimilation and full engagement of newcomers to the community of practice.

To date, little attention has been paid to the differences between novice and experienced newcomers in the situated learning literature, consequently little has been established about the role of legitimizing processes in facilitating or impeding experienced newcomers' entry transitions. This paper reports two separate studies where more arduous and challenging transitions emerged for experienced newcomers evidenced in legitimizing processes, relations with others and professional identity contextualization. The paper argues that experienced newcomers' entry transitions are inadequately explained by apprenticeship model-based approaches such as legitimate peripheral participation and that the negotiations required to achieve participation and reification alignment may instead result in marginalization (termed "marginality" Wenger, 1998, p. 180) or exit.

First, the extant research on newcomer legitimizing processes and transitions into knowledge practices will be explored. The characteristics of novice and experienced newcomers are then compared as a basis to understand their differing transitions into a practice. A qualitative case study approach and semi-structured interviews were used to accumulate more evidence (Harland, 2014) from two studies. The findings contribute new evidence that legitimizing processes play a significant facilitative role in experienced newcomers' transitions to full participation. The paper argues these workers' transitions are not accounted for in current situated learning research and addresses this gap to inform understanding and practice.

1.1. Entering a knowledge practice

The concept of the informal practice community of knowledge in action was established by Lave and Wenger (1991). They described a process of legitimate peripheral participation or gradual advancement of newcomers from the periphery to a legitimized, assimilated position of practical, technical and conceptual expertise at the core of the specific knowledge practice community. Progression occurs through an apprenticeship model described as peripherality - a process of co-participation and engagement in the "actual practice of an expert, but only to a limited degree and with limited responsibility for the ultimate product as a whole" (Hanks in Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.14). Scaffolding (Orlikowski, 2006) provides developmental tasks, proximal guidance, support and affirmation of growing expertise and practitioner identity formation as full participation or legitimacy is achieved. The three significant elements comprise peripherality, legitimation and participation.

The community of practice and legitimate peripheral participation notions gained traction across the business management, education, health and information technology fields (Hughes, Jewson, & Unwin, 2013; Kimble & Hildreth, 2005; Li et al., 2009; Plumb, 2009). Wenger and Snyder (2000) and Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) additionally provided instructions for managerial approaches to be taken by organizations to establish and maintain communities of practice to maximise knowledge management and innovation outcomes.

The communities of practice concept has been criticized as overly focused on social relations and insufficiently accounting for more complex factors (Fenwick, Nerland, & Jensen, 2012). The power relations within the collective, for instance, may be 'counter-cultural' and create resistances (Vince, 2002, p.72) to differing knowledge, knowledge transformations and epistemic practices that exist across communities of knowing and knowers (Aalbers, Dolfsma, & Koppius, 2014). Complexities arise from the unique constraining institutional elements of both organizational settings and individual practice communities (Hotho, Saka-Helmhout, & Becker-Ritterspach, 2014).

Local knowledge practice sites constitute activity systems (Engeström, 1987) where the nature and extent of individuals' participation is structured and guided by codes, practices, role allocation, and artefacts towards the activity system's purpose (Mathisen & Nerland, 2012). Members must adopt the framework and specialized applications of the field required in the local site or workgroup. In addition to their existing knowledge and qualifications, newcomers must learn locally and organizationally constructed norms and practices (Hotho et al., 2014). All new entrants undergo transformative processes as they experience, interpret and adjust to their work role at local and macro levels (Lambson, 2010). Interpretations alter as they respond to contextual signals in accordance with their existing knowledge, values and purposes (Feldman & Feldman, 2006).

Lave and Wenger (1991) predicted that demonstrations of proficient use of role or task-specific resources (for example, design templates, technology, innovative application or novel adaptation of existing designs) may result in a newcomer's validation and progression from an entry point at the periphery of the practice community to a more central position. Innovative use of resources that results in advanced or novel outcomes (Perrot, Bauer, & Roussel, 2012), for instance, can alter the worker's place in the social and power relations of the group through altering co-workers' perceptions of the newcomer's expertise. This

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