# Communities of Practice: Reinscribing Globalized Labour in Workplace Learning

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**Abstract:** The concept of 'communities of practice' is widely used in workplace learning research. Whilst critiques have expanded its use in ways that claim more socially just approaches to workplace learning, a more critical analysis for change is needed. This paper draws on a case study of career guidance professionals' work with young people, radically disturbed by new welfare-to-work policies. Their emotional and ethical labour reveals powerful processes of alienation, but also of resistance. Without reinscribing such aspects of globalized labour and capitalist power relations in workplace learning, 'communities of practice' remains a concept with a gaping hole in the middle.

## Communities of Practice Critiqued

Within the arena of workplace learning research, theories of situated learning have become dominant in recent years. In particular, the conceptualisation of learning through participation in 'communities of practice' is widespread (see, for example, Hughes et al, 2007). At the same time, Lave and Wenger's (1991) original concept of communities of practice has been critiqued and extended to consider processes of exclusion for would-be entrants (Wenger, 1998; Colley, 2006); boundaries for multiple communities of practice (Fuller & Unwin, 2003); and the impact of already-experienced entrants (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004).

Colley, James and Diment (2007) have also called for more complex understandings of the dynamics of participation in communities of practice beyond notions of learning as a unidirectional process of 'becoming' and then static 'being'. Their investigation of teachers quitting the further education (FE) sector in England demonstrated that national and institutional policies could create processes of 'unbecoming' (movement out of a profession), especially when they conflicted with teachers' ethical, political and emotional commitments to their work. They pointed to the weakness of situated learning theory in addressing such issues of power relations in the workplace. Moreover, they questioned whether the 'community of practice' concept offered an appropriate framework for understanding workplace learning, since these tutors had been engaged in very *isolated* radical practice, 'under the radar' of management's gaze: they had decided to quit FE teaching as those spaces were drastically curtailed by the implementation of new policies. However, even this critique considers power relations only in terms of immediate institutional and governmental structures impacting on FE teachers' practice.

## From Critique to Critical Analysis

This paper seeks to go beyond such critiques, which represent primarily descriptive processes, to undertake a more 'critical analysis' for change (Ebert, 1996). It does so by asking about aspects of power unaddressed in the concept of communities of practice, or in most critiques of that concept thus far. As Avis (2009) has argued, situated learning theories have become popular partly because they are concerned with the immediacies of practice and its complexities and fluidities, all too often ignored in deterministic structural

analyses. They also appear to offer a progressive framework in which to recognise skills and knowledge developed in the workplace and enhance them in a more socially just way. However, insofar as they target the transformation of working practices and productive processes – that is, in capitalism, the labour process and the production of surplus value – they tend to pay lip service to social antagonisms at the site of waged labour, and assume a harmony of interests between capital and labour.  Indeed, such analyses typically ignore the production of 'really useful knowledge' in the workplace, that is to say, knowledge that 'starts to lay bare capitalist relations, presaging *societal* transformation' (Avis, 2009, pg. 9, my emphasis; see also Seddon, Henriksson & Niemeyer, 2010).  Workplace learning, then, has to be seen as 'situated' in the global dynamics of capitalist power relations in this epoch of imperialism, which have become normalized in lifelong learning (Mojab, 2009).  This means going beyond debates around the *theoretical* dimension of learning (e.g. Mode 1 *vs.* Mode 2 knowledge) to focus on its *political* dimension, in particular its social purpose, its political content, and the classed, raced and gendered interests it serves (Colley, Hodkinson & Malcolm, 2003).  In this respect, the situatedness of learning in the workplace can be understood as the formation of labour power and the exploitation of its capacity to produce surplus value, *and* as debate, resistance and dissent in response thereto (Seddon *et al.*, 2010).

In order to develop such an in-depth critical analysis, rather than a descriptive critique, of the concept of 'communities of practice', I draw on empirical data from a study of workplace practices and learning, and test both the concept and the analysis against those data.

### Disturbed and Disturbing Work: a Case Study

Seddon *et al.* (2010) argue that the politics of global capitalism pervades lifelong learning through 'disturbances' in work such as occupational reform and regulation, but that such disturbances may also engender innovative practice, new collectivities, and a 'politics of we'.  The study presented here, funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council from 2008-09 (grant ref. RES-000-22-2588), investigated the case of a 'disturbed' profession, that of career guidance for young people in England (see Colley, Lewin and Chadderton, 2010). This profession has been subject to repeated reform in recent years, most latterly in policies to eradicate its specialist infrastructure, relocate it within a new multi-professional youth support service (named Connexions), and transform it into a new profession of generic 'personal advisers' (PAs) together with practitioners seconded from a range of other social, educational and youth services.  Supposed to provide 'holistic support' for young people with the greatest social and economic needs, PAs instead found themselves with unfeasibly large caseloads, lacking the provision to improve young people's circumstances, and undertaking disciplinary surveillance and placement instead.  In particular, the funding for Connexions was tied to government-set targets for reducing the numbers of young people classified as 'NEET' (not in education, employment or training).

We used time-use diaries to explore how careers advisers' (CAs') overt work functions had been disturbed since they were re-designated as PAs.  In addition, through in-depth interviews with 17 career guidance-trained PAs from 3 local Connexions services, and with 9 former PAs who had quit 8 other Connexions services, we were able to investigate less overt aspects of their day-to-day practices and learning in the workplace.  Our findings suggest three key aspects that were both disturbed and disturbing: identity work,

emotional labour, and ethical labour. The distinction between them is a heuristic one for the purposes of analysis, but in practice they are often inseparable and inter-related.

Identity work included dealing with widespread confusion both within and outside Connexions about the PA role; and resisting the shift from a specialist to a generic role (regarded as 'jack-of-all-trades-and-master-of-none'). It also had a disturbing effect on professionals' sense of identity and membership, linked closely to their workplace learning: the data reveal different degrees of partial unbecoming (progressive de-skilling), not-becoming (never developing a professional identity in career guidance), total unbecoming (quitting Connexions and career guidance altogether, and (re-)becoming (quitting Connexions to work in another sector of career guidance). These outcomes of identity work are certainly problematic, not least from the point of view of the progressive loss of capacity in a profession, and its impact on the delivery of an important public service for young people. They also point again to the need for us to complexify the notions of 'learning as becoming' in communities of practice, and question their ubiquitous utility.

Here, however, I am concerned particularly with data revealing emotional and ethical labour, the relationship between them, and the practices and learning they entailed. Evidence of these forms of labour reveal deep disturbances in work and learning, and can provoke us to think beyond the current dominant conceptualisations of 'communities of practice'.

## Emotional Labour

Hochschild's (1983) seminal definition of emotional labour is that it 'requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others' (p.7). Many such studies address contexts of customer or public service, and the task of producing 'proper' feelings in the customer/client, focusing on negative consequences of stress and burn-out. In this project, PAs gave such accounts of the emotional demands of working with severely disadvantaged young people in the context of work overload and inadequate resources:

> Sometimes it gets us quite frustrated, because if the young person tells you something, and you're so desperate, you know there is nothing out there in this borough to help them with, that becomes really very frustrating. (IY, PA, p.14)

Emotional labour also involved coping with frustrations that increasing bureaucratic record-keeping and oversized caseloads reduced the time they could spend helping clients, and created disappointment about their effects on the quality of their work with clients. Almost all of the former PAs we interviewed mentioned suffering from periods of depression and/or stress because of the tensions experienced in their work, and explained that these had contributed to their decision to leave Connexions, as did WD (quoted above) who quit her job during the project, saying that she 'couldn't take it any more'.

## Ethical Labour

Cribb (2005) has argued that managerialism in public services encourages 'ethical drift' – the ritualistic meeting or manipulation of targets – posing ethical dilemmas for practitioners, who "…need to continually make decisions about when to conscientiously object, when to comply and when to adopt a stance of 'principled infidelity'" (pp.7-8). Such decision-making is a form of work within a division of labour for ethical

responsibility, related to role-construction and positioning within the field *prior* to individual practitioners' entry into that role.

PAs' offered many accounts of disturbing ethical dilemmas they face on a daily basis because of the way their role is constructed. Some PAs worried about how to offer career guidance interviews universally to final-year school pupils, when caseload size meant they had to resort either to inadequate 10-minute interviews, or group interviews which did not offer confidentiality. PAs working with caseloads of 60-80 clients needing 'intensive support' were confronted by dilemmas about which young people they could help, and to what extent. The same PA could vacillate in their stance, depending on how they responded to this tension at any particular time:

> I spent most of last week with one client who is homeless and has got lots of issues and no one seems to want to help him because they've tried before and they say he doesn't engage and goes round and round in circles. That was most of my week. (BM, PA, p2)

> If you can help the majority a bit, it's better than helping one person a lot when they might not even move into something positive. (BM, PA, p4)

Across the sample, PAs and ex-PAs spoke of being pressured by managers to place young people in unsuitable destinations, not record clients as 'NEET', or even forge signatures, in order to meet targets:

> Ringing [young] people, going round [to their houses], knocking on doors and hassling people, and I felt like I worked for the Gestapo. […] I can't remember anyone achieving anything positive as a result of me going and knocking on their door (HS, ex-PA, p13-14)

One PA we interviewed did not have his short-term contract renewed, and believed this was because of his refusal to pressurise young people into inappropriate placements. Such dilemmas were a major concern for all those interviewed, producing further emotional stresses, and frequently cited by ex-PAs as a prime reason for leaving Connexions. It is important to recognise that individuals' responses to these dilemmas could vary at different times between compliance, conscientious objection and principled infidelity, and be individualised or more collective.

### Reinscribing globalized labour in workplace learning

In interpreting and theorising such data, we need to recognise that they are generated in a particular social, economic and political context – that of late capitalism, or imperialism. International lifelong learning policies now demand that young people take individual responsibility for their own 'employability', irrespective of the actual prospects of employment or the economic conditions which determine them. Services such as career guidance and other social services face on-going cutbacks in funding, and at the same time have become marshalled in the implementation of welfare-to-work policies (Colley, 2007). Such responses to global economic crisis and social polarisation position both educational practitioners and their clients in relation to labour. In the context of Connexions, the labour power of PAs is (re-)formed, exploited and brought to bear upon young people as the 'raw material' that must be transformed into potential labour power,

albeit flexible enough to be drawn into and out of the labour market as needed, and securely controlled when it is surplus to demand (cf. Levitas, 1996).

When labour power is forced to express itself simultaneously both in terms of use-value (quality of the product) and an exchange-value (volume produced) – for example through close audit and increased productivity – then:

> …the labourer experiences a *contradiction* within her concrete existence. When labourers have regard to the quantity and the quality of their work, then a tension, an irresolvable conflict is set in motion. Whether to spend labour-time on a commodity's quality or to spend less labour-time on it (thereby raising productivity): in this way the worker is faced with a banal, everday contradiction in working life. (Rikowski, 2002: 13, original emphasis)

We can see such tensions clearly expressed in the PAs' accounts given above, and they are often the most overt indication of alienation, in the Marxist sense of that term. Alienation is not itself a painful psychological sense of isolation or estrangement (though this may be one of its effects), but is an integral aspect of the fact that, under capitalism, we have to sell our capacity to work physically, mentally and emotionally – our labour power – in the labour market, so that our innermost selves become a commodity (Allman, 1999). As the products of our labour are separated from us – in this case by the commodification and reification of young people in 'NEET' targets – so too our own personhood becomes reified and turned against us. Our labour power is controlled by the hostile forces of capital in the interests of its economic competitiveness, and becomes experiences as a *lack* of power (Brook, 2006). This is compounded by top-down prescription and intense forms of managerial audit in terms of quantifiable targets and quality standards which alienate us from the labour *process* as well as from its product, from ourselves, and from the young people we work with.

This can produce painful dislocation and malaise, most often experience as de-skilling and 'stress'. The latter is an example of an ideological concept – one which obscures social relations and presents the 'status quo' as inevitable and common-sense (Allman, 1999). 'Stress' locates the problems of alienation as the individual's failure to cope, and the response is invariably palliative, such as medication or therapeutic counselling. In fact, our experience of stress 'reflects the experience of a transition from what was once a meaningful and creative area of human labour to one that is mechanical and potentially totally alienating and exploitative' (Brook, 2006: 72). With some resonances to Hochschild's (1983) analysis, Fromm (cited in Brookfield, 2002) also argues that alienation reduces 'political intelligence' (p.104), creates cynicism, and results in 'automaton conformity' (p.106) requiring radical education to challenge such false consciousness.

However, these are not the only or inevitable consequences of alienation. Labour power is a commodified but unstable condition 'subject to the central, inherent antagonism within the wage-labour relationship' (Brook, 2009: 542). Workers' consciousness is therefore routinely contradictory but dynamic and antagonistic – it entails continual, though constrained and variable, struggle to reassert some control over the process and product of our labour power. Alienation is therefore never a complete or closed process:

> …workers mark the experiences of alienation by their continual search for the means to ameliorate and resist its effect, which, in turn, corrodes their self-reification […] as commodities (Lukacs, 1974; Rees, 1998) and with it, the possibility of 'absolute' management control. (Brook, 2009: 544)

Capitalism cannot separate labour power from the worker herself, with the result that working class consciousness can develop, and resistance to dehumanising social relations occurs. Workers are reflexive, and can challenge alienation. Therefore we find instability, subversion, resistance, sabotage, especially in conditions where productivity and the labour process are being intensified.

In the data from our project on career guidance professionals, we find many examples of such responses, and indications of potential for new collectivities. PAs often support each other in resistance to imposed identities, in coping with the emotional demands of the work, and in addressing ethical dilemmas. They spend an entire week trying to resolve one young person's social problems, or refuse to put a young person under pressure to take up an unsuitable placement, even though they know this will undermine their service's ability to meet its targets. They put their jobs at risk, or eventually quit them, because they are not prepared to engage in practices they believe to be unethical. Sometimes all they feel they can do is grumble amongst themselves, sometimes they openly and repeatedly challenge their managers and argue their case in team or service meetings. However minimal these acts of resistance may be, they have the potential for engendering the 'really useful knowledge' of class consciousness and more collective forms of struggle.

What we can take from these experiences is that education (including career guidance) is a form of production (of human capital as labour power), and that *the economy itself* is a social form of learning (Rikowski, 2002: 6). It is this understanding that is absent from discussions of situated learning and communities of practice in almost all of the literature that draws on these concepts. Whilst some have addressed the differential power relations between different groupings (e.g. FE tutors, college managers, national funding agencies and government), they rarely (if ever) address the fundamental power relations of capitalist society, the inherent antagonism between capital and labour within the workers' very personhood, or the political economy of learning in the workplace. Until we can reinscribe such an analysis of globalized labour into our understanding of workplace learning, 'communities of practice' will remain a concept with a gaping hole in the middle.

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