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Title

Learner Identity and Transition; an Ethnographic Exploration of Undergraduate Trajectories

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Abstract

This paper considers ethnographic data collected during undergraduate students' transition to Higher Education (H.E.) Drawing on Lave and Wenger's (1991) Communities of Practice theory the research focuses on the psychological process of identity as a trajectory, considering how reconciliation and negotiation of identities across and between communities influences transition. We aimed to explore the academic practices which construct the transition experience, to analyse those practices in terms of student identity and participation and to explore some of the psychological mechanisms which underpin transition to H.E. The data sources included observations, informal social interactions, one to one interviews and document analysis. Data collection took place over the first term of an undergraduate course. A theoretical thematic analysis was undertaken investigating the ways in which identity shaped participation, the practices that influenced participation and how participation subsequently influenced learner identity. We argue that the reconciliation of past, present and future identities is psychologically challenging for students during educational transition and this influences individual trajectories. Some practices assumed an already autonomous learner rather than enabling development of autonomy. Inability to participate in valued (and often implicit) academic practice was seen to negatively influence learner identities, delaying full participation. The focus for transition research could therefore consider enabling systems and practices which acknowledge differences and fully support successful changes in learner identity.

Introduction

The connection between identity and education has long been a focus for research enquiry. For example, attention has been given to school and adolescent identity formation (Davidson, 1996; Kaplan and Flum, 2009; Wigfield and Wagner, 2005) and the ways in which students on vocational degree courses develop a professional identity (Orr and Gao 2012; Fairbanks et al, 2011). There is also a growing consensus that educational contexts influence identity formation with Flum and Kaplan (2006) arguing that education must focus on the adaptive construction of identity by

promoting students' agency, confidence and questioning skills. The current research takes a distributed approach (Wenger 1998) defining identity as a sense of self which emerges within and across multiple communities. When the term learner identity is used this specifically relates to a sense of self engendered through participation in the educational community. Paechter (2003) argued that in transition from one educational environment to another there is a concomitant lack of surety. Issues of identity become more salient at certain times in our lives than others. Learner identity is unsure in transition because students do not know what to do or how to act in a new educational landscape.

Transition to Higher Education

There is also a large body of research on transition to H. E. focusing primarily on ways to support the process, which is useful for practitioners. The literature suggests that enabling successful transition is clearly an issue across disciplines and universities both in the UK and internationally. Zepke and Leach (2005) conducted an international meta analysis and found that many institutions concentrate on helping the students to fit in to their existing university cultures. Zepke and Leach call this the "assimilationist approach." The emphasis has tended to be on student expectations and how these align (or not) with institutional practices with recommendations for ways to change expectations (Rowley, Hartley and Larkin 2008). Research has focused on the need for clear, accessible information pre entry about the institution and early contact between institutions and students (Berger, 2002 Darwent and Brooman 2014, Heverly, 1999). Alongside these more procedural matters, the importance of developing students' social relationships to facilitate integration has been extensively researched (Gallagher and Gilmore 2013; Mannan 2007, Schwarz and Washington 1999; Johnson, 2001) Institutional services have also been investigated for example financial aid, child care, student housing, study skills support and the library. Research suggests that providing institutional services increases positive student outcomes (Astin, 1997; Darwent and Brooman 2014; Rickinson, 2008; Turner and Berry, 2000). A common means of supporting undergraduates is to provide extracurricular study skills in dedicated learning support centres (Gamache 2002, Swift and Coughlan 2011, Wingate 2007) which typically cover time management, essay writing, presentation skills and note taking. Research frequently concludes that undergraduate students have difficulties with taking responsibility for their own studies and adapting to independent learning (Lowe and Cook 2003, Murtagh 2010, Leese 2010, Rowley, Hussey and Smith 2010; Hartley and Larkin 2007) with time management being highlighted as a particular issue (Lowe and Cook 2003, Bowl 2001) The proliferation of transition research and interventions clearly demonstrates commitment across the sector to help

students during the transition process. However, there is a need to understand the underpinning psychological mechanisms which separate successful and unsuccessful transition and whilst the existing research suggests concrete practices which influence it, the actual psychological process of entering HE remains under researched.

Underpinning much of the literature is the notion (Zepke and Leach, 2005) that students should adapt to the institution where they enrol, learning to do things 'as they are done round here' in order to succeed. Tierney (2000 p 209) argues for a different approach claiming. 'The challenge is to develop ways in which an individual's identity is affirmed, honoured and incorporated into the organisation's culture.' The discourse of adaptation argues that institutions should review their processes to enable students to remain connected to their lives and experiences outside the university. The emphasis in this approach is on institutional cultures (Zepke, Butler and Leach 2012). Indeed existing research suggests that inflexible practices are counter to successful transition (Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit 2010). The challenge for H.E. institutions is to review their practices, increase knowledge of prior cultural educational experiences and adapt teaching and assessment to acknowledge diversity. The current paper takes an adaptive approach and considers some academic practices and the synthesis between prior and emerging learner identities during transition.

Defining Transition to Higher Education

The rationale for this adaptive approach emerges from contemporary learning theories, which emphasise the situated nature of learning and reconceptualise it as identity shifts in the face of participation in institutional practices (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013). This calls for a particular definition of transition. Despite the plethora of research surrounding transition, it is difficult to locate actual definitions (Tobbell, 2014). Transition can be defined as a negotiation between the individual and the social contexts they inhabit (Crafter and Maunder, 2012). Following this, an emerging focus for research in transition (Tobbell and O'Donnell 2013, Tobbell 2006, Orsmond, Merry and Callaghan 2013) draws on Wenger's (1998) communities of practice (CoP) theory. Wenger argues that learning activities cannot be considered separately from their context. For a learner to participate in the practices of a community, they need to be able to communicate in the common language of the community and operate according to its values and norms. The model does not deny the mechanics involved in learning such as the processes of perception, memory or the accumulation of knowledge but argues that they should not take centre stage in understanding learning and that these factors are constructed and reconstructed as a function of participation. From this perspective, the central task in educational transition is successful participation in new practices. The theory considers how

participation in a community influences member identity. This is a powerful psychological process which is missing from more cognitive theories of learning. Identity is seen as a dynamic, developmental process which both shapes and is shaped by community membership. Learning offers new forms of meaningful identification and identity influences the ability to learn. Such an understanding of transition fits well with existing literature. The more procedural literature focuses on the practices and how they can be successfully negotiated, whilst adaptive models of transition acknowledge the individual nature of identity and the struggle to participate in new communities.

Theorising transition

Participation is a central tenet of CoP. The theory emerged from Lave's (1997) observation of apprentice tailors in Liberia. She noted that at the start of their apprenticeship they simply watched the experienced tailors. Lave termed this legitimate peripheral participation. The lack of participation is accepted as the apprentices do not yet have knowledge and experience of how to proceed. Over time the apprentices were able to begin making garments, moving on to more complex tailoring as their experience grew. Lave modeled this as moving from peripheral to full participation. This is a useful model in understanding transition. Undergraduate students come from diverse educational settings where, by virtue of their success, they can be viewed as full participants. As they move to university they become peripheral participants with no experience of the new community. It follows then that an observation of undergraduates' participation during transition could offer new insights into the process.

Lave and Wenger (1991) make a fundamental distinction between learning and intentional instruction. Whilst they do not deny that learning takes place where there is teaching, they also highlight that what is learned may be problematic with respect to what is taught. Thus research which focuses on the social organization of educational institutions will bring into focus not only what students learn but also what they do not and what that comes to mean to them. So to understand transition we need to examine the context in which it is situated. They also acknowledge that there is ambiguity inherent in peripheral participation. When peripherality is enabled it suggests an opening, a way of gaining access to sources for understanding through a growing involvement. When peripherality is disabled, where the student may seek sources of understanding but not find them, the learner may be marginalized and full participation is unlikely to happen. The current research therefore focused on practices which enabled or disabled participation and considers how this influenced the students' transitional trajectories.

Wenger (1998) argues that there is a connection between identity and practice. In engaging in action with and relating to one another our practices "deal with the profound issue of how to be a human being" (p149). Participating in a new community changes our identity. Identity is therefore a negotiated experience. We define who we are by the ways we experience ourselves through participation. Identity is shaped by our experience as community members, by encountering what is familiar and unfamiliar. A successful student in a previous learning community may feel challenged and uncertain about their ability in a different setting. Previous knowledge and understanding of how things are done may become obsolete. This uncertainty could provide a motivational force to seek out and participate in valued practices but may also act as a disincentive, particularly where community practices are inaccessible or perceived as hostile for newcomers. Both participation and non participation are contingent upon the degree of identification with a practice. Willingness to engage depends on how connected an individual feels to a given community. Talking to students about their experiences could therefore provide information about the connection between participation and identification.

In transition we join a new community, whilst also maintaining membership in other communities. Wenger (2010) saw identity as a trajectory which reflects the journey both within and across communities. He theorized identity as a nexus of multi membership. The very work of identity entails an experience of multi membership and the work of reconciliation needed to maintain identity across their boundaries. It is sequential, as we travel through the world and carry identity across contexts. It is also simultaneous as we belong to many communities at any given time. These identities may complement, enhance or conflict with each other. Identity is characterized as collective and individual. It is something that we are actively engaged with and also something others do to us. Identity is a source of self nourishment but at times the conflicting demands of multi membership can be difficult and painful. Wenger calls this the 'dance of the self' (p7.) In transition, students need to negotiate between and across existing communities. Tobbell (2014) has argued that judgements about the quality of transition can be made through assessment of individual trajectories during the transition process. Some trajectories may be inbound, allowing successful learning, whilst others may be outbound, undermining the possibility of learning.

Some Communities of Practice do not enable full participation but may provide a kind of access which is significant enough to contribute to the learner's identity. Wenger (2010) called these peripheral trajectories. According to Wenger, this mix of participation and none participation tells us

something about the individual power of the learner to define and shape fundamental aspects of their world. Peripheral trajectories shape what students attempt to know and understand and what they choose to ignore. It also directs who they seek connections with and who they avoid. Wenger sees these actions not merely as personal choices, (which is important given the emphasis in education systems on personal agency, sometimes known as independent learning) but also as consequences of social relations and cultural expectations within the community. The current research therefore also considered how institutional arrangements mediated participation.

CoP theory assumes that we learn and become who we are through interaction not only with other human beings but also artefacts such as books and digital technology. The language, tools, documents, image, roles and symbols also shape a community. Practice is not only what is said but also what is unsaid, it includes tacit conversations, subtle cues, untold rules of thumb, perceptions, underlying assumptions and shared world views (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). The key to legitimate peripherality and movement towards full participation is access not only to the old-timers, apprentices and other members of the community but also to information, resources and opportunities for participation. Lave and Wenger's theory considers engagement with the technologies of everyday life as well as participating in social practice. Gathering data about educational practice would therefore necessarily involve a highly detailed examination of the social environment. CoP therefore provides a model to address the issue of understanding the psychological process of transition but it demands specific methodological approaches.

Methodology

Typically, research in transition has tended to be quantitative, designed to identify patterns in student reports using large scale questionnaires (for example Lowe and Cook 2003). However, a growing body of qualitative research has aimed to capture the complexity of experiences by talking to students, positioning transition as an idiosyncratic phenomenon (Warin and Dempster 2007, Maunder et al 2012). Both methodologies involve self reports which can usefully tell us something about what students say about the subjective experience of transition. However, transition involves changes to identity as the individual participates in a new social and cultural world. To understand the dynamic between identity and participation would necessarily involve observing the ways in which students negotiate the new community. O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007) suggest that researchers must move beyond what students experience to gain a deeper understanding of how and why they experience this. Research into the student experience therefore should encompass multiple methods of data

collection to gain understanding of the explicit and implicit practices of the learning environment and to consider how they shape the learning experience. An ethnographic approach was therefore taken in the current research as it allowed participation in the lives of both educators and students. It is also the dominant methodology in the Community of Practice literature. (Tobbell 2006). Attention was given to both the empirical processes that students directly experience, through personal accounts, and also the actual processes which may influence participation more indirectly, through observations or document analysis. In doing so we took a critical realist position (Sayer 2000). Whilst this research says something specifically about psychology undergraduates, the analysis also demonstrates some of the ways in which the social context influences transition trajectories which may be broadly similar for undergraduates across disciplines. Data were originally collected for a professional doctorate in education (Turner 2013) This was a large project with multiple aims which cannot be fully captured in one paper. The aims we focus on in this paper are:

- To explore the ways incoming identity influences participation and H.E. learner identity
- To explore the academic practices which construct the transition environment for first year undergraduate psychology students
- To analyse academic practices in terms of learner identity and participation

The context

The research was undertaken in a Psychology Department situated within a larger School at a university in the North of England. The Department achieved above institutional benchmarks in both retention and achievement of students and was rated favourably in the National Student Survey when compared with other like institutions. There were 130 students in the first year of study when the data were collected with an average entrance tariff of 280 UCAS[1] points and a GCSE[2] at grade C or above in Maths (or equivalent qualifications). Observations, of the entire cohort during lectures and smaller groups of around 25 students in seminar sessions, were undertaken in the first term. I also observed some informal social interactions of students participating in academic practice. 36 hours of observational data were collected in total. In addition, interview participants were recruited during induction. Eight women and one man volunteered to take part which broadly reflected the gender ratio of students on the course. Participants were interviewed once independently in the first term and collectively in two focus group interviews at the end of the academic year. Pseudonyms have been used to protect anonymity. Document analysis was undertaken on student handbooks, lecture notes,

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[1] Universities and Colleges Admissions Service which handles all applications to British universities
[2] General Certificate of Secondary Education

feedback to students and induction materials. These artefacts are made and used in accordance with valued community practices and often depend on shared cultural assumptions to be understood. Analysis therefore helped to identify implicit as well as explicit practices.

Data Sources

- Observations of student induction
- Observations of informal social interactions
- One to one interviews
- Focus group interviews
- Document analysis

Table 1 here

Ethnographic analysis

Qualitative research provides many analytic opportunities (Tobbell, 2006). Our choices were guided by the notions of community and practices and the synthesis between identity and participation. In order to meet the aims of the current paper the focus of data analysis was on the psychological processes which influence and are shaped through participation in transition. The main analytical tool used in the analysis is that of interpretive themes. By combining the observation and document data to construct a narrative of transition, we took a contextualist approach (Willig 2001). The data from interviews was drawn upon to further identify themes and a theoretical analysis was undertaken. This allows for a more detailed analysis of some aspects of the data (Braun and Clarke 2008) to meet the aims of this research. Interview data was read and re-read to gain familiarity with the data which was then organized into meaningful groups using specific questions linked to our theoretical perspective. These were:

- How does practice influence participation?
- How does participation influence learner identity?
- How does identity influence participation?

Analysis and Discussion

Learner Identities and trajectories

Wenger (1998) argues that as trajectories, our identities incorporate the past and the future whilst engaged in negotiating the present. Transition can be positioned as a time of psychological flux and identity reconstruction. Our current focus on the negotiation between past and present identities aims to illuminate some of the psychological processes of transition for students entering H.E. The following analysis considers how prior identities may influence participation in new practices and the ways in which this creates different transition trajectories. Observational data are presented from induction to set the contextual scene before interview data are considered.

The university had an Academic Skills tutor who introduced himself to the students in a session during induction week. A leaflet advised students that the Academic Skills tutor could provide help with research, problem solving, time management and other study skills. Support ranged from a single informal session to more regular tutorials. Students could seek help because they were struggling with academic assessment or because they wanted to improve their grades. The tutor was not able to proof read work or correct errors for the student but he could point out the type of errors the student was making and provide strategies to help them correct themselves. As there was only one academic skills tutor, students were advised to book an appointment early on in the preparation of the assignment they needed help with. The academic skills tutor was not a Psychology graduate and could not comment on the content of an essay.

The influence of incoming identity

In keeping with many university support systems, skills were positioned as transferable across topics and contexts (Wingate 2007). The following analysis considers how this practice constructed participation and identity. It also highlights how incoming identity influences participation. Tracy quickly took advantage of study skills support.

Well I read the essay writing book recommended by the academic skills tutor and that was useful and I think for me it was more useful for before you started writing essays

She also looked for content specific resources. She reported

Then another book as well that I'm using it's called How to Learn Psychology and in fact that is more useful than the writing essay book on essays cos there is actually a sample essay in there

Tracy was clearly comfortable in finding things out independently, which is a highly valued practice in H.E. She told me

I did an essay in exactly the same way that I would do a project at work cos I was a project manager where I would decide what your aims are and then find out will this work what people think about these things as they are now so I approached it in the same way really

Tracy was a direct entrant on the degree course with over 20 years of work experience and as such was not a traditional student on the course. She had completed an Open University course as a part time student. She recognized that the practices of her previous community could be adapted to her current learning environment. Central to Tracy's success was her ability to take the initiative and act independently. Whilst support was available on a one to one basis in the institution, students had to be sufficiently reflective to recognize the need for help and assertive enough to seek it. Thus, a certain level of maturity, confidence and initiative was required in seeking help very early in the term. Successful participation for Tracy was enabled by her previous experiences. As a consequence she quickly sought the help she needed to be successful in her new community, demonstrating an inbound trajectory. Tracy was able to easily reconcile her previous form of community membership and was forging a successful learner identity in H.E.

 Gemma also made a connection between communities.

when I did Access that was somewhere like here some teachers would say here is your brief now go and do some reading like Access really helped with coming here you didn't really learn well you did learn stuff like content about Psychology but it was mainly teaching you essay writing skills, presentation skills and stuff like that more how to do it

Gemma arrived with study skills that enabled her to participate in her new community, and recognised that successful participation was not just about developing knowledge but also understanding what to do with that knowledge. However, Gemma also expressed doubt in her abilities in the new environment, illustrating the psychological impact of transition.

…but here I feel as if I will be judged more harshly yes I do mean judged harshly…I'm not very good at time management I thought I was but what I'm finding is because I'm new and I'm quite nervous and partly because I'm not sure that I'm in the right place in the sense that maybe I'm not an academic and I'm not good enough so I feel a bit stupid really and don't like to ask questions and make a fool of myself.

For some participants the reconciliation between various forms of community membership was problematic. Transition can be an anxiety provoking time. Where practice is unfamiliar, participation is less likely. This inability to participate shapes learner identity and trajectory.

Katy said

...when the lecturer asks a question or says what do you think about it I don't know because like nothing is going through my head and I feel really to say that I knew a lot at college I feel like I don't know anything now so I just stay quiet.

Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that non participation comes from a lack of connection to the community and that students' actions are not merely personal choices but reflect the social relations and cultural expectations of the community. In a community which champions independent learning and where institutional access to support is contingent on self referral, participation becomes less likely for some. Transition is a time of reconstruction, where the learner negotiates which aspects of their previous learner identity to maintain and which require transformation. For Tracy this was unproblematic, however Gemma and Katy both reported crisis. In contrast to Tracy, they were experiencing identity conflict between and across learning communities which had closed down participation.

Implicit practices and identity

Recognising what new practices involved was also not easy for everyone. Charlotte said:

I'm fine with the lectures and stuff but I'm not sure how that gets me to an essay or...just how to find the right information to put in, in the end

Rebecca, when asked about writing her essay, said

I don't know I haven't really planned it out yet I think it's just floating at the back of my mind at the minute and er but I think I will eventually plan it out more it's just getting to do it that's my hardest push.

Jenny commented

There's no homework I'm like coming home and sorting out my notes in my folder and doing my reading and thinking right so...and that's it ... there's nothing really to do.

Whilst some of the content of the undergraduate curriculum was familiar to the younger participants who had already studied Psychology at A Level, the process of engagement with the curriculum was quite different. In terms of successful transition, students needed to not only recognise differences in process but also understand how to respond to them. Motivation is one of the challenges of learning independently in the H.E. environment. However, as these participants demonstrate, it is difficult to motivate yourself if you are unsure of how to proceed. Practice is hidden for these students. Lave and Wenger argue that when peripherality is disabled the learner is marginalized and full participation is unlikely to happen.

Katy said

I like lectures cos I like taking notes and feeling like I'm learning something and I wish there was more of it I wish there was more learning cos I feel like I'm paying a lot and I'm not getting enough out of it...I've got that much spare time so that's a big disappointment.

Whilst Katy is clearly engaged in a process of meaning making in lectures she also holds a learning perspective which is at odds with the new community. For her, learning resides in the lecture theatre in the same way that in schools and colleges the classroom provided everything she needed to know in order to participate. In H.E. attending a lecture is the tip of a very large academic iceberg. Successful participation requires the students to recognise that they should be doing something else in their "spare time". Working out what this entailed was one of the major challenges for these students. Such students will inevitably experience a different trajectory to someone like Tracy and may remain peripheral participants for longer.

Rebecca reported

Here, you don't know if you are getting it until it comes to us handing essays in but I suppose in the main you don't really know how you're doing. In college I knew where I was going or if I didn't I could ask or like look at what she said on my work and here I don't know whether I'm doing OK or not til I get that essay back.

In her previous learning community regular formative feedback occurred in the classroom and through weekly homework. In the new community, until summative feedback was given (in the current research this happened at the end of a term) she remained unaware whether she needed support in academic writing. Rebecca would have to experience some form of failure in order to recognise

she needed help. As Tracy demonstrated earlier, where students arrive with experience of accessing information independently they are more able to identify the need for proactive support. In other words, in order to learn how to be an independent learner, you need to already demonstrate independence. Reconciliation of past, present and future identities did not seem to be psychologically challenging for Tracy. For other students such as Rebecca, study skills support could only occur retrospectively and would be contingent upon receiving negative feedback. Her previous learning identity coupled with unfamiliar institutional practice had delayed her participation. These two participants were demonstrating different trajectories during transition which we argue would influence their emerging learner identities and subsequent participation. Whilst the university is clearly committed to supporting students during transition, the method of delivery fails to recognise the psychological processes involved in accessing this.

Identity and failure to participate

During observations it became obvious that whilst students were often trying to engage with academic practice this was not always successful. This third theme considers how failure or inability to participate influences identity. It begins with contextual information about tutorial support within the Department before moving on to observational and interview data analysis.

The Department ran a series of weekly personal tutorials in the first term designed to help with transition. Every member of staff in the Department had a tutor group of around fifteen students. The hour long sessions focused on Personal Development Planning, Information Literacy, Referencing and Essay Writing Skills. Students were therefore provided with some study skills support in the first term as part of their curriculum. Students were not monitored for attendance in these sessions and they were not included in student evaluations. These were generic tutorials and did not focus on any specific assignments on the course, again resonating with the notion that study skills are transferable across contexts (Wingate 2006)

Students were expected to source their own information for an assignment. During observations I watched two students searching for journal articles electronically (via a system called Metalib) for their essay title "Assess the contribution of nature and nurture in language development". The essay was due in at the end of the week. They began by using the search term "nature and nurture". Metalib offered them 25,593 responses. They then tried to limit the responses by asking for "nature and nurture" and "Psychology". This reduced the number of responses to 8,403. They then tried "language

development psychology and nature nurture" and found 3,639 responses. They tried "language development and psychology" and found 107,502. They noticed that they could restrict the category of journals by topic area and searched for "language development" in Psychology journals. They found 7,633 responses. They decided to look through some of these. The first five responses they accessed were book reviews. They could only gain access to one of these. It did not give them any useful information. They went back to their search term "language development psychology and nature nurture". They decided to look at some of the abstracts for these articles, many of which were neuro-scientific and far beyond the understanding of a first year undergraduate. After 45 minutes, they gave up and decided to go to the library to look for books instead.

These students, participating as the independent learners valued by the academy, discovered that using Metalib was time consuming, frustrating and ultimately unproductive. They resorted to a more familiar way of finding information. Peripheral participation has therefore been disabled by the complexity of the task. Lave and Wenger (1991) talk about learners having a space of "benign community neglect" (p. 93) in which to configure their learning relationships, allowing learners to explore possibilities. However if valued practice is inaccessible for student members of the community then exploration becomes problematic. The opportunity for engagement with practice is missing.

Participants also talked about their negative emotional responses to failure to participate in valued practice.

Carl said

Yeah I have tried it a couple of times but you just get so fed up with it that you don't bother. Then you get done for using Wikipedia but if you can't find anything that you can understand what else can you do

Catherine reported

They gave us a lesson on how to access it (Metalib) and which buttons you click but they never said how difficult it is to actually find something

Catherine provides a clear example of one of the limitations of traditional study skills delivery. Tutors had given instruction to students on how to use Metalib by going through the stages of using the system itself. Students were then expected to go away and find relevant information for their

assignments on their own. However, as the narrative demonstrates, successful participation is far more complex than clicking a few buttons. Knowing which search terms to use, and being able to understand the information you access are complex skills which need to be situated in context.

In the focus group at the end of the year Catherine explained that she resorted to familiar practice in trying to find a textbook which would give her all the information she needed.

Well I'm still trying to find the Holy Grail textbook that's got everything in that you need to know cos I just find it so tedious to just keep reading through pages and pages and pages of journal articles and they end up just telling you one thing or you can't understand any of it

Seeking out a textbook demonstrates that the students are still relying on familiar practices from their previous learning communities rather than engaging in the new practice of finding and evaluating multiple sources. Their learner identities have remained unchanged as a result of their inability to participate successfully. They have remained peripheral participants with static trajectories supporting the idea that participation and identity are inextricably linked.

Taken for granted practice

Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that participation depends upon transparency of practice and organising activities for learners which make the meaning of practice visible. For example, meeting deadlines requires students to understand how much time writing successfully takes. Selecting and evaluating information and resources is the first stage in successful academic writing (Wingate 2006) and is one of the major skills required to write successfully in academia. Interestingly this was not considered in either personal tutorials or academic skills sessions and would therefore seem to be a taken for granted practice. The final theme considers the impact of trying to gain access to meaning from academic artefacts. It begins with a summary of essay feedback comments, followed by an excerpt from an example of reading material provided for the students, before considering some interview data.

When analysing feedback on student essays the following comments were made

You don't reference any research methods literature in the assignment

Your essay is mainly descriptive - you need to read more widely to develop a more critical stance.

You have relied too much on one source and should be reading more up to date research literature

You must not use an A level textbook at degree level

Write in a more academic style – avoid the use of "we" Reading research articles will help you with this

The students were provided with literature to read in some modules. The following is an extract from Smith , Harre and Van Langenhove (1995) which was used in a module on research methods.

It is assumed that what a respondent says in an interview has some ongoing significance for him or her and that there is some, though not a transparent, relationship between what the person says and beliefs or psychological constructs that he or she may be said to hold. This approach can be described as a phenomenological perspective. At the same time it can be recognised that meanings are negotiated within a social context and that therefore this form of interviewing can be seen from a symbolic interactionist position. (p 10)

Northedge (2003) has written about the difficulty for newcomers in the H.E. community in making sense of academic discourses. In everyday conversations the social context supplies a frame of reference to enable participants to understand immediately most of what is said. However, academic discourse is by its very nature often decontextualised and abstract. To access meaning requires a frame of reference supplied by implicit questions and purposes shared within the community rather than the immediate social situation. These frames of reference are often taken for granted by fully participating members of a community so that newcomers get few clues to help them. Lave and Wenger (1991) make a distinction between talking about a practice and talking within it. They argue that for newcomers " the purpose is not to learn from talk but to learn *to* talk" (p109) Students must be able to see how the discourse works, the nature of the questions asked, the forms of evidence and argument employed and the types of conclusions arrived at. These are important skills in terms of critical analysis, a highly valued practice within the academic community. According to Northedge (2003) students internalise these skills through participation rather than explicit explanation.

Struggling to gain access to meaning had clear psychological consequences for some of my participants. Carl said

...the terminology in it has been quite overwhelming really and there's been none of that prep talk before and you sort of feel like you're expected to know how to do it and to know that terminology and I think there was a lot of frustration about it and I felt very disheartened. I thought, God am I on the right thing here, I'm not going to be able to survive if this is what I should be able to do and I'm expected to know what this is about now and I'm out of my depth.

Paula commented

It frightens a lot of people off trying to read those journal articles I felt like crap after reading them I felt out of my depth I felt I wasn't bright enough I thought what the hell am I doing here I don't understand this article how am I going to get a degree in it you know so it's difficult I don't want to be spoon fed I just want some reassurance or guidance as to how to go about things.

Reading is not a straightforward cognitive process but involves a struggle to gain access to both implicit and explicit meanings in the text. In order to write successfully students need to be able to make meaning from unfamiliar discourse and understand which information is relevant and what should be discarded (Wingate 2006).These participants demonstrate the difficulties students may have in engaging with academic discourse. The impact on participation and learner identity is clearly articulated. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) note that documents are made and used in accordance with organisational routines and often depend on shared cultural assumptions to be understood. Journal articles are written by the academic community, peer reviewed by that community and written not only to disseminate research findings but also as a means of demonstrating and measuring the success of the author's research career. Students are expected to engage with these academic artefacts as legitimate peripheral participants in the community. This practice did not seem to enable full participation however. The failure to participate has clearly impacted on the students' learner identities.

Conclusion

In this paper we aimed to explore how academic practices construct learner participation and shape identity, as well as considering the influence of incoming identity on participation. We have focused on gaining access to study skills support and developing information literacy. The data suggests that being proactive in seeking support was contingent upon a confident and autonomous incoming learner identity. Students who were unsure how to participate (and therefore possibly more in need of support) were less likely to ask for help. At times students resorted to strategies that helped in their previous learning communities. Their learner identities remained unchanged which made future successful participation less likely. Unfamiliar and often implicit practices negatively influenced developing learner identity.

Given our argument that success in transition can be understood by reference to participatory trajectories, the inability of students to understand meaning and engage in process suggests that the systems, rather than the individual student, may result in problematic transition. The adaptational approach shifts the notion of deficit from the student or previous educational setting and locates it

instead in an unresponsive academy. Whilst the goals of H. E. have remained constant, today's more diverse student body may require more help to achieve them. Hatt, Baxter and Kimberlee (2002) argue that students no longer represent an 'elite' of high flyers and universities cannot expect to teach them in ways that were appropriate for the highly selected groups previously found in H.E. Fazey and Fazey (2001) point out undergraduate students have the potential to be autonomous learners and that it is the responsibility of teachers in H. E. to enhance the students' meta cognitive skills. The current research has demonstrated the interaction between and across community identities and this is an area for further research focus and debate.

Table 1 Interview Participants

Participant	Entry Qualification	Previous Educational community	Living in/at	Traditional entry?
Charlotte	A level	School	Halls	Yes
Tracy	OU Diploma	Workplace	Home	No
Catherine	Access to H.E.	F.E. College	Home	No
Gemma	Access to H.E	F.E. College	Home	No
Katy	NVQ	F.E. College	Home	Yes
Paula	Direct entrant	Workplace	Home	No
Carl	A Level	School	Home	Yes
Rebecca	A Level	School	Halls	Yes
Jenny	A Level	F.E. College	Home	Yes

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