

## **Moving Beyond Communities of Practice in Adult Basic Education.**

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This chapter draws on our experience as adult basic educators to reflect on learning in communities of practice. We discuss the issues of marginality, peripherality, legitimacy, boundaries, and identity encountered in our attempts to foster communities of practice in a series of innovative adult literacy and numeracy courses using information and communication technologies (ICT). In order to frame the concerns that underpin this discussion, the chapter begins with a brief overview of the recent history of adult basic education (ABE) in Britain, and introduces the setting within which the courses have been developed, an ABE Open Learning Centre in the valleys of post-industrial south Wales. We describe how, in 1997, the installation of a network of computers with Internet access at the centre highlighted problems with existing procedures, training, and resources, necessitating a search for new ways to integrate ICT into teaching and learning practice. In collaboration with staff, learners and volunteers, we gradually developed an approach based on fostering communities of technology-based practice through pair and group work on digital media projects. While this approach has brought many positive outcomes, and is now integral to most technology-based provision at the centre, we have also discovered contradictions between the way participation and learning are played out in communities of practice and the fundamental aims and concerns of ABE. The closing sections of the chapter reflect on those contradictions, which are now encouraging us to seek ways of moving beyond the communities of practice approach in adult basic education.

### **Adult Basic Education in the UK**

In Britain, adult basic education refers to that part of the national education system concerned with literacy, numeracy and language development in adults. The lead organisation for ABE in England and Wales defines basic skills as:

The ability to read, write and speak in English (and in Welsh in Wales) and use mathematics at a level necessary to function and progress at work and in society in general. (Basic Skills Agency, 2003)

In May 1997, the election of a centre-left New Labour administration heralded a shift in UK education policy which was to bring a major expansion of ABE provision. In June 1998, Sir Claus Moser, chairman of the UK Basic Skills Agency (BSA), was commissioned to report on the extent of adult basic skills need in the UK. The resulting document, *A Fresh Start - improving literacy and numeracy* (Moser, 1999), stressed the personal, social, and economic cost of low basic skills, explicitly linking this “shocking situation” to various indicators of deprivation and marginalisation.

National strategies for basic skills were reformulated on the basis of Moser's finding that for a significant proportion of the population<sup>1</sup> to lack basic skills has:

...disastrous consequences for the individuals concerned, weakens the country's ability to compete in the global economy and places a huge burden on society. People with poor literacy, numeracy and language skills tend to be on lower incomes or unemployed, and they are more prone to ill health and social exclusion. (DfES, 2001)

The report offered a raft of recommendations, based on a greatly increased financial investment in ABE. Among 21 action points, the majority of which have subsequently been implemented, Moser advocated the use of information and communication technologies in adult basic education, asserting that they offer "...a powerful tool in the process of raising levels of literacy and numeracy" that "...needs to be a staple of basic skills programmes" (Moser, 1999 sections 1.40, 1.41).

This focus on ICT reflected the tenor of the times. New Labour explicitly linked their commitment to education with a strategy of recreating post-industrial Britain as a "knowledge economy". At around the same time, academics and commentators in Europe and the US were beginning to express concern about a growing "digital divide" in access to ICT (Castells, 1998; Schön et al., 1999; Timmins, 2000; Norris, 2001), a concern which also began to influence policy-makers. Programs of computerisation were initiated across the public sector, and ICT began to be seen as a significant factor in the development of basic skills provision. However, in 1997, ABE institutions were mostly lagging behind the rest of the education sector in taking up the new technologies, and there was little reliable research or guidance available for those who wished to take up Moser's challenge. The high expectations that e-learning and interactive products would act as an effective means of addressing basic skills needs did not begin to be critically examined by academic research until almost three years later (Mellar et al., 2001).

### **The Open Learning Centre**

The Coleg Morgannwg School of Basic Skills, a network of ABE outreach centres, is one of the principal providers of adult basic education in south Wales. Its administrative and teaching headquarters, known as the Open Learning Centre (OLC), are housed in converted shop premises in a small market town at the heart of the Valleys region. From the 1970s onward, the Welsh Valleys, once famous for coal and steel production, became home to high unemployment and persistently low levels of educational attainment. By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century this was one of the poorest areas of the European Union, and as recently as 2002 it was estimated that almost 40% of the adult population had significant basic skills needs (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002). Through the 1980s and 90s, a slew of national and European initiatives focused on reversing the region's decline, attracting inward investment from multinational corporations and fostering the growth of small and medium enterprises in precision manufacturing, high technology, and new media. The resulting upturn in the regional economy brought a growing recognition of the need for new skills development among the local workforce, and emphasised the pivotal

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<sup>1</sup> It is estimated that around 7m adults in England, 1m in Wales and a further 1.2m in Scotland need to improve their literacy or numeracy skills (Basic Skills Agency, 2001; DfES, 2001; Welsh Assembly Government, 2002; Basic Skills Agency, 2003).

role of education in the region's recovery; the OLC and its allied outreach centres have been significant contributors to local economic and social regeneration strategies.

In early 1997, in a pioneering move for Welsh ABE, the OLC was equipped with broadband Internet access and a network of personal computers, printers, and scanners. The impact on practice at the centre was profound, with a variety of effects becoming evident over the following months. In traditional literacy and numeracy classes, where the main teaching resources were texts and worksheets, computer-based activities were mainly limited to some word processing and occasional Internet browsing. Learners' ICT use depended on the support and supervision of tutors or volunteers with computer know-how, who at this time were in short supply. Consequently, learners wishing to gain or improve ICT skills often ended up somewhat isolated from the main learning group, working alone at the computers and not always fully participating in the literacy and numeracy activities going on around them. Overall, the effect was that these groups began to lose their cohesion, with ICT and basic skills activities running in parallel. Tutors were overstretched, and learners unhappy with the level of support available.

Meanwhile, the centre had also begun to offer new courses in computer literacy. Mainly working individually, learners followed worksheet-based exercises using a variety of software packages. These classes were under the supervision of tutors who had been recruited for their ICT skills, but were not necessarily ABE specialists; they were provided with further training in basic skills teaching once in post. These courses recruited well and quickly built up large waiting lists, but problems soon became evident. Firstly, it emerged that existing entry screening procedures were proving inadequate for ICT courses; a substantial proportion of enrollees already had some educational qualifications, formally putting them outside the remit of ABE. Secondly, although their initial assessments had made it clear that many of the students on these new courses had significant basic skills needs (including many of those with qualifications), the structure of the courses offered little opportunity for seriously engaging with those needs. And, among those learners with recognizable basic skills needs, most proved unwilling to engage in traditional activities explicitly focusing on numeracy or language use when invited to do so. Their main reason for attending was to gain ICT skills; with home PC ownership still uncommon at this time, many were simply loath to spend time away from the computer,

### **The Impact of New Technologies**

By late 1997, it was clear that while recruitment had greatly increased, – a significant measure of success in funding terms - many of the new learners were not drawn from among those with acute basic skills needs that it had been hoped ICT access would attract. Meanwhile, both through the shared networks and in terms of teaching provision, previously autonomous OLC activities had begun to overlap with those of other branches of the host college<sup>1</sup>, bringing new frictions and rivalries. Occasional unacceptable usage of the Internet by staff and students, and ongoing battles over technical support, brought other new problems to be dealt with. There was a feeling among staff that teaching and learning provision had begun to fragment, and a fear that this fragmentation could undermine the strong sense of a shared mission that had

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<sup>1</sup> In the UK, state-sponsored ABE is part of the Further Education (FE) sector, and is mainly administered through large regional FE colleges delivering a broad spectrum of post-16 education and training.

always made working and learning at the OLC so worthwhile. Nevertheless, there was also a growing sense that exciting new possibilities were being opened up; not only through the capabilities of the technologies themselves, but also because of the new social and skills mix that ICT had brought to the centre. Against this background, OLC tutors and managers were becoming acutely aware that new strategies were required for ICT use to be more closely and successfully integrated into centre activities.

The first step toward forming those strategies was made in September 1997, with the launching of *The Internet Club*, an experimental course on the use of email and the World Wide Web. Influenced by the lead tutor's contact with the participatory design (PD) movement in computer science, learners and volunteers were encouraged to play a major part in developing learning activities (Harris, 2002). Through PD a connection was established with Lave and Wenger, and *Situated Learning* (Lave & Wenger, 1991) became an essential reference point for these first deliberate, if tentative, attempts to foster communities of practice around the new technologies. Peer mentoring was encouraged, and legitimate peripheral participation allowed – learners were able to “hang-out” around the technology, jointly learning and interpreting interfaces, sharing developing expertise, or simply watching. Toward the close of the course, building Web sites and publishing them on the Internet began to address the requirement that “educational design must engage learning communities in activities that have consequences beyond their boundaries” (Wenger 1998, p. 274). After a year, outcomes - in terms of retention, student feedback, and accreditation success - were encouraging, and valuable experience had been gained.

### **Fostering and Developing Communities of ICT-Based Practice**

During the 1998-2000 teaching period *The Internet Club* continued. In this year, under the guidance of a new ICT-literate centre manager with a background in project-based and contextualized learning, much of the traditional literacy and numeracy provision was reorganized to include the planned use of computers. In these *Combined Studies* courses literacy and numeracy tutors collaborated with ICT-trained colleagues to deliver a mix of technology-based and traditional ABE activities. Although learners in these groups often still carried out ICT activities individually, and collaborative work and group discussions tended to take place away from the ICT tools, a much greater degree of integration was achieved. With a growing emphasis on group work around shared artifacts, *Combined Studies* began to develop into provision oriented toward developing communities of practice.

The 2000-2001 academic year brought the launch of the first (near) full-time ABE course to explore the use of digital media as a basis for teaching and learning. Modelled on the Boston Computer Clubhouse initiative (Resnick et al., 1999), the year-long *Computer Creative* course involved learners in the conception, planning, execution, and exhibition of a variety of new media projects. Pair, small-group and whole-group activities utilised a range of traditional and digital tools to produce diverse physical and virtual artifacts – texts, pictures, video, animations, and interactive applications. The course was explicitly designed to incorporate as many elements of the emerging communities of practice approach as possible, and was meticulously documented throughout in a longitudinal field study using participant observation, interviews, video recording, and the collection of documents and artifacts (Harris, 2004). Early data from this study were used as a basis for formulating some

of the key lessons that had been learned to that point, and for deriving principles to guide the design of subsequent courses (Harris & Shelswell, 2001).

In the following year, experience gained through *Computer Creative* provided the basis for a further expansion of ICT-based provision at the OLC. Aspects of the course were split off into a number of discrete project-based courses focused on developing literacy and numeracy through desktop publishing, Internet technologies, digital video and animation, and computer programming. At the same time a series of new introductory ICT/ABE courses were launched. By 2004, the cycle of development which began with *The Internet Club* had resulted in the communities of practice approach becoming central to almost all teaching provision using ICT, also influencing many of the non-technological courses offered by the centre.

Over the period outlined above, the community of practice approach has undoubtedly been central to managing the OLC's successful integration of ICT into almost every aspect of teaching practice. Much has been learned and many issues have arisen. Attendance, retention, and learning outcomes suggest that a majority of learners have found the courses worthwhile. Many participants have become increasingly committed to learning, both within and beyond the classroom, coming together - without prompting from tutors - to do course-related work outside of session times. Groups of learners have arranged to progress together to other courses at the OLC, preserving the core of their community. At the time of writing, one group has arranged to take a course together at a community learning centre unconnected with the OLC; another is continuing their filmmaking work at the OLC through the summer break, while a third meet every week at a learner's home to continue their projects. While such events might perhaps be unremarkable in other educational contexts, they are to be celebrated in ABE.

Clearly, ABE teaching and learning based on fostering and developing communities of practice around shared work with digital tools differs significantly from traditional approaches. One aspect of this difference is the way in which it becomes possible to combine some of the most useful features of the two prevalent modes of instruction in traditional ABE, *individualised group instruction* and *teacher-led small group instruction* (Beder, 2004). By putting peer mentoring at the centre of the education process, and facilitating varying configurations of pair, small-group, whole-group and individual work, learning activity becomes more ubiquitous and continuous than in situations dependent on frequent teacher intervention. The spectre of students or groups spending long periods waiting for assistance, or conversely dominating the attention of the tutor, is effectively banished. Similarly, there is much less opportunity for, or sanction of, activities at the computer not related to learning outcomes. Learner participation is predominately either legitimately peripheral or central, and much more rarely marginal than was seen in the early days of computers at the OLC. While this has been a welcome outcome, ascertaining what *type* and *quality* of learning has been taking place is more problematic. In order to address this question, we will begin by considering the situated learning approach to ABE from the point of view of the tutor.

### **The Role of the Tutor**

Adult basic educators are professionally and legally committed to the promotion of equal opportunities and democratic values. In addition to subscribing to these aims, many tutors are also personally motivated by the belief that supporting adults to improve their basic reading, writing, and number skills may also help them to alter

their view of their own potential. The hope is that learners will use new-found skills and confidence to pursue a wider range of educational and employment opportunities, in ways that benefit themselves, their local communities, and society as a whole. The term *empowerment* is often used as shorthand for this “envisioned synthesis of individual and collective change” (Page & Czuba, 1999). However, such commitments inevitably involve tutors in difficult value judgements.

With a communities of practice approach, the role of the tutor necessarily becomes much more biased toward the management and regulation of social interaction<sup>1</sup>. As the links between literacy and exclusion made by the quotations at the beginning of the chapter suggest, it is precisely those individuals who experience most difficulty integrating into dominant cultures who are also most likely to be ABE learners. Many learners are under-confident and less articulate than those in other branches of adult education. Within the constraints of a community of practice of fixed duration and specifically oriented toward certain types of activity, the danger is that more confident members may thrive, while those less socially able may find their disadvantage continued - or even reinforced and extended. As work patterns vary, tutors must try to foster collaborations between participants with similar or complementary approaches and abilities, and to tactfully discourage collaborations between those for whom a particular working arrangement is likely to be unfruitful.

Potentially, marginalisation and disempowerment can arise in a number of ways. Although providing peer support generally benefits a mentor, allowing them to develop interpersonal skills and deepen their own learning, time spent in this way can also be seen as a diversion from one’s individual goals. Some learners may simply avoid acting as peer mentors, while others seek roles that allow them to yoke another’s efforts to their own ends. This was evident in the case of Cassandra<sup>2</sup>, a confident female learner in her mid-60s who evidenced strong motivation in individual work while being markedly less enthusiastic about collaborative activities. When interviewed about her experience of collaborative pair working, she explained:

I’m strong-minded so I’ll say let’s get cracking and he’ll be pushed along...  
I discuss how he needs to achieve what I’m wanting and discuss content in a few seconds and ask him for objections, but what is there to discuss if he has no imagination or creative ability...? He’s happy with that.

Although Cassandra apparently found the collaboration satisfactory, the male student to whom she referred was one of the very few to leave the course before completion. Supporting others’ activities may not always be effective in scaffolding their learning activity, and may even impede their progress. Brian, an ICT-skilled *Computer Creative* participant, would frequently intervene in other learners’ activities, only to carry out all the necessary actions himself, without explanation or giving those he “assisted” the opportunity to practise the skills demonstrated. Issues such as these may also arise at small-group and whole-group level, when members who are committed to the successful outcome of a particular project find their goals conflict with others who are less committed or productive.

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<sup>1</sup> This contrasts views expressed in our 2001 paper (Harris & Shelswell, 2001), written halfway through the cycle of development outlined here, at which point we felt that the primary role of a tutor was that of *facilitator*, a role involving much less active management of the social aspects of the group.

<sup>2</sup> Fictitious names have been substituted when discussing individual cases.

There is also the danger that ways of thinking and acting that materially contribute to marginalisation and disempowerment (for example, the inappropriate use of profanity or the expression of racist or sexist views) may be reproduced and transmitted within the community to an unacceptable degree. Contentious issues such as asylum seekers – dealt with extensively and provocatively in Britain’s popular press – have on several occasions provided the context for the expression of xenophobia in discussions among OLC group members. Adult educators have evolved many techniques to turn such incidents to positive use, for example by using the offending views as the starting point of a discussion or further research into the actual facts and opposing viewpoints. However, in a community of practice the current status of the participants involved – central, peripheral, or marginal to the practice – will be highly relevant to the outcome of such attempted solutions.

These are critical issues for adult basic educators. Communities of practice are in some senses self-regulating systems, with members putting checks and balances on each other’s behaviour according to their shared understandings of the collective goals to be achieved. In order to function, communities of practice require the promotion of mutual respect and support between participants. ABE tutors must be prepared to actively intervene in order to ensure that the overall quality and direction of the community that emerges through self-regulation is one that accords with principles of equity and empowerment. However, it is clear that this management role will always preserve power inequalities between teacher and learners; these must also be made explicit and become accepted in order for the community to function. There may come times when a tutor must unequivocally declare a learner’s participation as illegitimate in order to preserve the integrity of the community. ABE Tutors deeply committed to inclusivity may thus, paradoxically, become implicated in processes of deliberate exclusion.

### **Legitimation Conflicts**

Despite Lave and Wenger’s (1991, p. 35) suggestion that “...there may very well be no such thing as an ‘illegitimate peripheral participant’” experience at the OLC indicates that, at times, choosing to define some form of participation as illegitimate can be a significant stage in the development of a community of practice. Communities are defined as much by whom and what they exclude as by what they contain; at times an act of exclusion may be essential to their continued cohesion. Questions of exclusion are often raised by participants who themselves seek ways to become more centrally included. On several occasions learning groups at the OLC have engaged in such practices, which we will refer to as *legitimation conflicts*. In such conflicts, the legitimacy of a participant – whether central or peripheral – is brought into question by other community members. If the person in question is sufficiently peripheral to the practice, they may be rendered increasingly marginal by other group members, or make themselves so by consciously withdrawing from contact with the group. In many such cases, increasingly frequent absences are followed by the learner “dropping out” permanently, with the legitimation conflict being resolved by their departure. When the person involved is a more central participant – such as a tutor themselves – other types of resolution are required.

Legitimation conflicts can develop around the phenomenon that Wenger (1998, p. 138) refers to as “experience driving competence”. This occurs when members with experiences and skills that have been significant in the formation of their identity, but which fall outside the community’s current regime of competence, attempt to change

the community so that it comes to recognise their experience as valid. For example, a long-term course participant, Harold, had been a successful building contractor. Despite his evident basic skills needs, Harold often tried to dominate group discourse with narratives revolving around episodes which demonstrated his superior skill and knowledge compared to other members. Over the three years of his attendance, this behaviour led to frequent clashes and disruption, and eventually resulted in his departure after a confrontation with a tutor. Members of his community openly expressed their relief. Similarly, a *Computer Creative* learner, William, who had once been employed in the broadcasting industry, continually criticised the conduct of video-based activities. From his point of view as an “expert”, he attempted to disrupt power relations by challenging the tutors on the extent of their expertise. William refused to accept that the goals of the course were not directly linked to the technical skills over which he claimed ownership. Like Harold, he too left of his own accord, but not before other learners in the group had requested his removal.

Although these negative examples are clearly problematic within the concerns of an inclusive ABE practice, legitimisation conflicts around competence may also have much more positive outcomes. When such attempts succeed, they assert legitimacy of membership, and can mark an individual’s transition from peripheral toward more central participation. This was vividly brought home in the case of Christina, a female learner in her early thirties. A tutor, one of two involved in the course, had entered some students’ work for an external accreditation early in the year, in the knowledge that there would be a further opportunity later in the year for the remaining students. On finding that her work had not been included on this occasion Christina complained of unequal treatment, eventually convoking a meeting of the learning group at a time when the tutor in question was unable to be present. During this meeting she argued passionately for the illegitimacy and marginality of the tutor’s participation. For her, it became necessary to portray another’s participation as illegitimate in order to preserve the validity of her own competence and assert the legitimacy of her membership. When legitimisation conflicts involve the tutor, in order to preserve their regulating role they must seek to avoid “two opposite tendencies: being pulled in to become full members or being rejected as intruders” (Wenger, 1998 p. 110). The tutors and learners involved successfully managed this, and the outcome was that as Christina became a more central participant, her assertiveness became a valued asset of the whole community.

### **Boundaries or Barriers?**

As legitimisation conflicts show, the spatial metaphors of centrality, peripherality, and boundaries capture something essential about the nature of communities of practice; we are all acutely attuned to sensing where we stand with regard to such social groupings. Experience at the OLC has confirmed that sustained engagement always gives rise to positions and boundaries, sometimes very quickly. By observing the activities and developing social relationships within and around an initially disparate group of learners, we can detect those signs (high levels of attendance, early arrival at sessions, shared specialist vocabularies, evidence of collaborative work on course activities outside of session hours, and so on) which indicate that a community has begun to come into existence. Among several factors involved, the prospective duration of the course appears to be especially relevant to this process. When learners and staff are mutually committed for a lengthy period – say a whole academic year – the forms of activity we have come to associate with the emergence of a community of practice may become evident within as little as three weeks after course

commencement. Courses over shorter periods gel at a slower rate, and require proportionately more activities explicitly directed toward community formation. Though also implicated, frequency of contact and how long each contact lasts appear to be much less significant.

Another condition highly relevant to community formation, as Wenger points out (1998 pp. 253-254), is the depth of learning that is taking place. The sooner participants begin to feel they are really engaged in learning together, the sooner community formation ensues. For us, this observation has emphasised the need to plunge into learning activities right at the very start of the course, and to engage in activities involving the whole group until boundaries between that group and other practices begin to appear. Another essential condition is some stability in the physical and resource environment. A learning group should be consistently linked to a specific setting, i.e. the same room and equipment. Our field study data show that participants establish “their” seats and use the same computers whenever possible, and that sub-groups will tend to make a particular part of a room a habitual locale for certain activities. Where this is not possible, the formation of a community of practice proceeds much more slowly.

As we have already noted, communities of practice come to be defined, at least in part, by who is considered to be *outside* their boundaries. This presents special difficulties with regard to the policies of continuous enrolment adopted by ABE organizations seeking to accommodate the artificiality of the academic calendar to the realities of adult learners’ lives. For later newcomers, their initially marginal place at the boundaries of a community of practice can as easily give rise to illegitimacy as peripherality and centripetal movement; a difficult position for both newcomer and established members. Establishing the point at which it is no longer acceptable to attempt to induct new learners into an established learning group rests with tutors, who may then find that fostering a community of practice conflicts not only with their commitment to widening access but also with organizational requirements to maintain enrolment levels. The quicker community formation takes place, the sooner such difficult decisions inevitably arise.

A reciprocal concern with boundaries is that community members “on the inside” may resist the need to move beyond them. As we have seen, one of the distinctive features of a communities of practice approach is the way in which participants become increasingly committed to learning and working together. Once formed, communities of practice are enduring, and learners frequently demand to remain on a course, even after their learning objectives and specific accreditation outcomes have been achieved. Perhaps ironically, a successful engagement in learning together can become an obstacle to further progress, as members begin to concentrate on finding ways of remaining within the familiar boundaries of their community of practice. Consider Sarah, a woman in her late thirties who has been repeatedly assessed as having severe literacy difficulties. On first attending the OLC in 1996, Sarah was withdrawn and lacking in confidence, and over six years of participation in courses using the communities of practice approach, she has always required a greater degree of support from tutors and peers than other learners. Yet, as her participation in learning activities has gradually moved from peripheral to central, her increasing ability with ICT has been matched by growing interpersonal skills and the blossoming of her problem-solving ability, particularly evident in numeracy activities. Sarah eventually adopted a ‘supervisory’ role in her classes, managing the distribution of session record sheets and assisting the tutor. And, building on her increasingly central

role in the learning groups she has been part of, she began to be legitimately peripheral participant in the wider organization of the OLC, carrying out small administrative tasks and helping staff with the production of learning materials.

For Sarah, school was a painful and damaging experience. Participation in the relatively “safe” environment of the communities of practice in OLC classes has been an important factor in her successful development as a learner. Yet, as she has now completed most of the courses available to her, remaining as a learner at the OLC grows increasingly untenable. She is clearly reluctant to leave, yet without an accreditation or funding route, the ABE system no longer has a place for her. Both she and her tutors are well aware that she is unlikely to find similarly supportive environments in other learning institutions, or in the workplaces her formal qualifications give her the opportunity to join. Much of her current learning involves finding ways to legitimate simply “staying put”. Reflecting on cases such as Sarah’s has both raised our awareness of some fundamental contradictions in the practice of ABE and led us to seek a deepened understanding of what *types* of learning take place in communities of practice.

### **Learning**

Wenger’s formulation of learning as *knowing in practice* has provided a powerful springboard for the developments at the OLC. Yet, while recognising the fundamental truth of his assertion that learning is a “living experience of negotiating meaning” which cannot be designed but “can only be designed *for*” (Wenger, 1998, p. 229), this definition does not sufficiently address the issues affecting the relationship between learning, empowerment, and identity in adult basic education. In this regard we have come to find ideas from the sociocultural tradition of cultural-historical psychology, activity theory and critical psychology - ideas which Lave and Wenger’s work has been instrumental in introducing us to - becoming increasingly useful. This critical tradition in psychology has developed a multi-level framework that links individuals, their communities of practice, and the wider organizational and societal contexts within which they are produced and reproduced. As well as influencing our understanding of the need for developing the institutional structures of ABE, these ideas are increasingly informing our classroom practice. In this section we briefly set out how they connect with our experiences of learning in technology-based communities of practice at the OLC.

Individual motivation within collective activities can be seen as dependent upon individuals being able to realise their personal needs through participation in the satisfaction of collective needs (Leont'ev, 1978, 1981b, 1981a). When individuals feel that by taking part in a collective activity they will gain improved control and a better quality of life, they are motivated to positively contribute to the creative expansion of that activity in new directions (Engeström, 1987; Holzkamp, 1991). Conversely, when collective activity seems to offer a person little possibility of improvement, they will tend to focus on coping with the contradictions between their own and collective needs, defensively seeking to avoid any lessening of their sense of control or any reduction in their possibilities for action. How individuals view the possibilities for fulfilling needs within a collective activity is often connected to their perception of where control is situated (Tolman, 1991, 1994, 1999; Roth, 2002). As a result of their socioeconomic and cultural background, and their own experiences at school and work, ABE learners are especially vulnerable to feeling that they have little or no control over their environment or personal circumstances. Often, the kind of learning

to which they are most accustomed is directed toward what adult basic educators call “coping strategies”, ways of being in the world that compensate for difficulties (with reading, say) rather than dealing with them.

The question, then, is whether learning in a community of practice can become *expansive*, in the sense that genuinely new ways of thinking and acting are opened up for participants, or is it more often *defensive*, in that what is being learned is mostly supporting or reinforcing existing attitudes and strategies. Clearly, these types of learning must be continually transforming into each other, in ways that differ among participants. The extent to which one or another type of learning comes to predominate in any community of practice will be dependent both on the specific circumstances within the community of practice itself, and on conditions obtaining in the larger environment in which the community is situated.

The recent expansion of ABE in the UK has been accompanied by an increasing emphasis on the use of quantitative performance indicators in the quality monitoring process. The success of any program is judged primarily according to results in terms of accreditation, retention, and progression rates. The level at which these outcomes are produced significantly affects the status of an organisation and those who work and learn there. Yet, such outcomes can often be of more significance to managers than tutors, and to tutors than learners. Although many learners are pleased to gain qualifications, it is only rarely their primary motivation; many are indifferent to the process of accreditation itself. Tutors as often see outcomes as impediments to successful teaching and learning as measures of it. In our experience, the difficulty of sufficiently aligning these viewpoints can be exacerbated by the social dynamics inherent in communities of practice. For example, the need to demonstrate learning gains by each individual participant may make it difficult for tutors to fully support legitimate peripheral participation as, from the point of view of a tutor’s need to support the production of outcomes, learners’ participation must always be becoming increasingly more central in order to remain legitimate. Consequently, learners uninterested in outcomes must find strategies for maintaining their peripherality while at the same time avoiding marginality and risking exclusion. In enacting such defensive learning, members may use their social skills as a resource. Daniel, an extroverted male learner in his late 50’s, contrived to spend an entire course based around digital filmmaking moving between the various groups, chatting while work was carried out by others, and never fully engaging with any task himself. The dilemma for tutors was that Daniel assumed a valuable role in building and maintaining the community of practice, within the boundaries of which the legitimacy of his peripherality was never questioned, while at the same time successfully resisting producing outcomes or engaging in learning that could be considered as expansive from the tutors’ points of view.

### **Identity and Trajectories of Participation**

From the point of view of situated learning theory, the task of adult basic education can be formulated as that of supporting trajectories of learners’ identity development that encompass increasingly central participation in communities of literate and numerate practice. As we saw at the beginning of the chapter, ABE specifically aims to improve learners’ opportunities for increased participation in society, an increased participation that is defined primarily in terms of economic productivity. What is sought is no less than the reconstruction of a learner’s identity. Whether or not this is commensurate with empowerment, is, of course, open to challenge, pointing to the

many contradictions inherent in the practice of ABE. What using Wenger's term does make clear is that such trajectories will always involve the alteration of learners' relationships to cultures within which their non-literate practices may have been an important component of their identity. The new prospects opened up by "the learning journey" also imply the leaving behind of familiar territory. Yet, as Wenger points out (1998 p. 168), boundary crossing is especially difficult when membership in one community implies marginalization in another. For many ABE learners, reconciling new aspects of identity and different forms of membership into a "nexus of multimembership" (*ibid.*, p. 159) may be the single greatest challenge they face.

Our experience at the OLC suggests the need to more specifically and transparently teach those integrative personal and practical skills which Wenger refers to as "reconciling aspects of competence" (*ibid.* p. 160). Although such teaching is already partly present in ABE, especially in those classes (outside of the scope of the discussion here) that engage with the long-term unemployed on semi-compulsory, intensive full-time courses, it is currently far too easy for such work to become displaced by other concerns. Clearly, ABE learners who cannot integrate the new competences they gain through participation in communities of practice into their daily lives, so that they may use and further develop them in diverse social settings, risk continuing marginalization and disempowerment. Happily, a number of our former participants have entered into more skilled and rewarding employment following membership in communities of ICT-based practice at the OLC. Yet, as successful as some individuals have been in the world of work, those communities have so far only rarely provided "paradigmatic trajectories" (*ibid.*, p. 156) which involve learners' onward progression into further or higher education. Despite significant progress toward widening access in further and higher education, the gap between ABE and other tiers of the UK education system remains wide and difficult to cross.

### **Moving Beyond Communities of Practice**

Our attempts to support the formation and development of communities of practice in technology-based courses at the OLC have brought us to boundaries from which practices new to ABE have begun. In the process, we have also found ourselves arriving at "...the intersection of multiple regimes of competence yet not clearly within any of them" (Wenger, 1998, p. 255). There have been many beneficial outcomes for the OLC staff and learners, especially in comparison to the isolating and fragmented models of practice that first emerged under the impact of the new technologies. Yet, as our approach has evolved we have become increasingly aware of the tensions and contradictions within it, and of those inherent in the practice of ABE itself. The strength of the communities of practice model lies in its recognition of the legitimacy of peripheral participation, and the way in which it suggests that the success of a community of practice is measured by its *overall* productivity and sustainability, to which individual community members make diverse but equally valuable contributions. However, the practice of adult basic education must always prioritise the support and recognition of individual learning outcomes. Firstly, and most importantly, because empowerment hinges on individual development, which communities of practices may not always foster; secondly, because formal education systems predominantly measure, and reward, individual achievement. Based on this recognition, we are now beginning to accept that the further development of the approach we have described here may require us to move beyond our community of practice in formal ABE, into areas of informal learning and the public communication

of science and technology which offer different opportunities and constraints. Above all, we have come to realise that while communities of practice “are a force to be reckoned with, for better or worse” (*ibid*, p. 85), they offer no easy solutions for adult educators. While our early engagement with the idea was coloured by the positive values we associated with the notion of community<sup>1</sup>, experiences at the OLC have made it clear that communities of practice are not, in themselves, “...in any essential way an emancipatory force” (*ibid.*). For us, moving beyond communities of practice continues to be a journey from innocence to experience.

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<sup>1</sup> See also Note 4, page 288 in Wenger, 1998. It is striking how Wenger's later work repeatedly emphasizes the moral neutrality and potential negativity of communities of practice (e.g. *ibid*, pp. 132).

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