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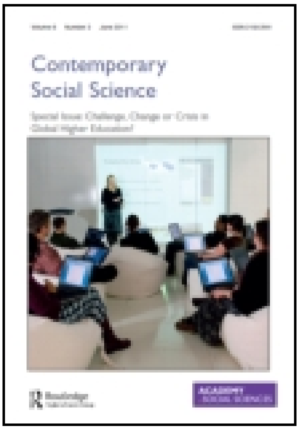

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Mobilising knowledge in community-university partnerships: what does a community of practice approach contribute?

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Mobilising knowledge in community–university partnerships: what does a community of practice approach contribute?

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Over the past decade different approaches to mobilising knowledge in Community–University Partnership (CUP) contexts have emerged in the UK. Despite this, detailed accounts of the intricate texture of these approaches, enabling others to replicate or learn from them, are lacking. This paper adds to the literature which begins to address this gap. The case considered here concentrates on one particular approach to knowledge mobilisation (KM) developed in the UK context. It provides an account of the authors' involvement in applying the concept, and practical lessons from a community of practice (CoP) approach, to developing knowledge exchange (KE) between academics, parents and practitioners. The authors' approach to KM explicitly attempts to combat power differentials between academics and community partners, and problematises knowledge power hierarchies. The paper explores the CoP concept and critically investigates key elements of relevance to developing KE in the CUP context. Specific themes addressed are those of power, participation and working across boundaries by CoP members with very different subject positions and knowledge capitals. The paper concludes that CoPs can be a useful mechanism for KM, but have many limitations depending on the specific context in which KM is being undertaken.

Keywords: community–university partnerships; communities of practice; knowledge mobilisation; knowledge exchange

Introduction

Setting up democratic spaces for knowledge exchange (KE) via Community–University Partnerships (CUPs) is a challenge where, to oversimplify the dynamic, power and authority are often seen to reside more in academics than community partners. This paper describes and interrogates whether a community of practice (CoP) approach helps develop such spaces. The authors have previously laid out the broad case for CoPs involving university academics and other members (Hart & Aumann, 2007, 2013; Hart & Wolff, 2006). In this paper, the focus is on a specific domain – related to supporting disadvantaged children and families – and some of its key dynamics (Hart, Blincow, & Thomas, 2007a).

The concept of CoPs has a complex, nuanced and theoretical legacy. The notion has been advocated within vocational education as a means to integrate and share academic, practice and research knowledge (Hughes, Jewson, & Unwin, 2007) and has found resonance with social and political theory acknowledging cognition and practice as intimately linked with

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particular social, political and cultural conditions (Henry, 2012). Simply put, CoPs can be described as communities created for sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise, with a membership committed to sharing knowledge and co-learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Smith, 2003).

This paper explores whether a CoP approach helped develop CUPs at one case study site. Four CoPs in Sussex, England, provide the empirical foci. Three of these were time-limited, with a closed membership of 11–20 members, meeting for 24, 14 and 12 months, respectively, at facilitated monthly 3-hour meetings, between 2008 and 2012. They took place alongside an ongoing open-ended CoP advertised as a Forum, to which anyone 'with a pulse' and an interest in the domain was invited to attend (Hart, Aumann, & Heaver, 2010). Funding for the CoPs has come from a variety of external and internal grants. Local groups and individuals contribute their time in kind by attending or speaking at events, and conversing afterwards.

The authors of this paper have, between them, spent 1000s of hours observing, participating in and supporting CoPs for CUPs. An amalgamation of the learning that comes from this involvement provides the empirical content for this paper.

The setting up and running of the CoPs have been a close collaboration between academics, practitioners, service users and parents. In each case, the aim of the CoP, which was shared by participants, was to:

- Create a vehicle for KE to embed learning and strengthen the capacities of both university and community sectors to tackle entrenched inequalities and develop further joint work;
- Offer an opportunity for researchers, academics, students, practitioners and parents, sharing an interest in working with disadvantaged young people, to develop their own areas of work, springboarded by approaches already developed locally.

This paper explores whether or not the CoP approach provides a useful mechanism for achieving these objectives through a consideration of critical incidents that have occurred over the life of the CoPs. The following section on CoPs for CUPs sets out the conceptual terrain in which the empirical material for this article is situated. Developing knowledge mobilisation (KM) through CoPs has many different facets, only some of which can be reported on here. The article concentrates on how CoP approaches can provide opportunities for co-production of knowledge that tackle issues related to power, participation and boundary working – issues often raised in both the theory and practice of CUP working and deemed most relevant in addressing some of the major challenges of using a CoP approach for KM in our empirical context.

The conclusion reflects back on whether or not the CoP approach taken here did help in achieving the aims of the CoPs, and explains some of its limitations in relation to KM for CUPs.

CoPs for CUPs

There is no clear consensus on what a CoP is, with disagreement within the literature over whether the term 'community' is even appropriate (see Edwards, 2005; Lindkvist, 2005; Roberts, 2006). Wenger and Snyder's (2000) description of CoPs as 'groups of people informally bounded together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise' (pp. 139–140) emphasises their voluntary origins; people in CoPs want to work together in a way that enables them to 'share their experiences and knowledge in free-flowing, creative ways that foster new approaches to problems' (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 5). Wenger (1998) describes the core features of a CoP as: mutual engagement, shared repertoire and joint enterprise. For some, a CoP must be completely organically orientated, whilst others, including Wenger, agree that they can develop through organised processes and outcomes.

Such divergence is indicative of the CoP literature more broadly. The evolution of the CoP approach has resulted in a literature that is fragmented, with inconsistent attention given to core conceptual and practice elements (which is further explored below in relation to the authors' own work). The variation in application of CoPs has resulted in a body of theoretical work that largely has its origins in mono-professional contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Orr, 1990), for example the development of a tailor's identity or the problem-solving practices of photocopier technicians, and offers varying degrees of analysis on the varying conceptual cornerstones of CoPs. This can also be seen in nursing practice concerned with professional identity and expanding professional capacity (Andrew, Ferguson, Wilkie, Corcoran, & Simpson, 2009; Garrow & Tawse, 2009; Short, Jackson, & Nugus, 2010), teaching and pedagogy (Evans & Powell, 2007; Kimble, Hildreth, & Bourdon, 2008), organisational learning and knowledge management (Bresnen, Edelman, Newell, Scarbrough, & Swan, 2003; Coakes & Clarke, 2006; Gilley & Kerno, 2010) and more latterly interpreted into new domains such as virtual spaces (see for example, Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2006; Johnson, 2001). What this literature does not address is how working across multiple and often disparate contexts leaves a unique set of problems in relation to knowledge management and the development of democratic learning spaces. Not least because the power/authority dynamics that might act across a community–university boundary generate a relationship between 'othering' and knowledge (Said, 1978). This is not to suggest that such stratification does not act within more homogenous spaces but the production and re-production of practice in different social, political and cultural conditions (Lave & Wenger, 1991) requires more careful attention.

So can an assessment be made of the usefulness of CoPs in such circumstances? The approach taken here is to use the empirical material presented below to identify from albeit uneven coverage those aspects that are most pertinent to the focus of this paper such as: How is power manifest in these spaces? How are different actors supported to participate in the CoP? What are the identity pressures on actors who operate across boundaries between domains in the establishment of democratic spaces for KE? This paper puts a purposeful focus on practice across domains by drawing on particular elements of CoPs to consider key processes and dynamics in the dialogic spaces that were attempted.

However, the CoP approach is certainly not a panacea to the difficulties of CUP working, which have been discussed in a large body of literature (e.g. Hart, Maddison, & Wolff, 2007b; Northmore & Hart, 2011, and including other papers in this volume). However, it does provide a particular lens and orientation to relevant issues, and a mechanism for potential knowledge production beyond ones that simply assume translation of propositional knowledge to practitioner and lay communities. To help answer the above questions, a brief overview of this knowledge debate is necessary as power, the first of the themes identified as foci for this article and discussed next, relates to CoP theory.

Power

We look to social theory for concepts of power which provide starting points for an analysis of the empirical work to follow. Foucauldian approaches in particular alert us to archaeologies of knowledge (Foucault, 1969) but also draw attention to the intimate relationship between knowledge and power (Foucault, 1991, 1998) which correlates strongly to the deliberate creation of space in CoPs where forms of heterogeneous power are in process (Foucault in Crampton & Elden, 2007). Foucault is primarily concerned with relational processes where power means 'a more-or-less organised ... coordinated cluster of relations' (1980, p. 198) and provides a useful starting point for thinking about how power might be manifest and understood in our empirical work. To do this successfully, consideration must also be given to how knowledge is used, exchanged, managed and contested within CoPs and recognition made of the connections between this and the powers in process. This is further made critical by the cross-domain nature of CoP participants that drawing on analysis of knowledge production can help us understand. Gibbons et al. (1994) have written an influential account of modes of contemporary knowledge production across a number of disciplines, and how they change over time, leading to the emergence of less 'traditional' modes, displaying different characteristics, locations and focuses of production. This trend reflects current but increasingly problematised arrangements that see Mode 1 – considered 'traditional', pure, disciplinary, homogenous, expert-led, hierarchical, peer-reviewed and almost exclusively university-based – given primacy over other knowledge (Gibbons et al., 1994). This is problematic if one accepts that there is more than one way to 'know' and produce knowledge through practice. Gibbons et al. (1994) worked to define a second mode, Mode 2 – considered applied, problem-centred, transdisciplinary, heterogeneous, hybrid, demand-driven, entrepreneurial, network-embedded and often increasingly handled outside higher education institutions.

Yet despite the richness of knowledge types and characteristics that these imply, simple binaries remain between what is considered expert – particularly where technical expertise tends to dominate discourse, displacing broader conversations in which competing perspectives and values might otherwise be explored. (Kinsella, 2002).

Hart et al. (2007b) suggest a mode that meets the specific construction, production and purpose of community–university working. Combining characteristics from the other four categories[1] they suggest Mode 5 – considered peer-reviewed, applied, heterogeneous, problem-centred, transdisciplinary and change-orientated, with a critical dimension of being 'co-produced by the university and community' (Hart et al., 2007b, p. 8). An argument could be made for also embedding Wenger's notion of knowledge as practice. A practice lens defines knowledge as a practical, situated activity (Gheradi, 2009, p. 124) rather than a decontextualised reality. Whilst CoPs demonstrate much potential for developing Mode 5 knowledge, the CoP literature has been critiqued for not adequately addressing the concept of power. Fox (2000) suggests that CoP theory tells us nothing about how, in practice, members of a CoP change their practice or innovate, and this may be limited or dictated by whether or how power relations are addressed. However, absence of empirical illustration does not mean that issues of power are not incorporated. There is considerable attention to power at the level of theory development – the latter half of Wenger's (1998, 2009) texts provide a sustained discussion of such issues. Cox (2005) argues that CoPs betray origins of anthropology in seeing the community as self-sufficient and somehow improbably insulated from the dynamics and interplays of people's lives. However, Wenger's (2009) perspective on power acknowledges that there is nothing intrinsic about a CoP that would ensure power differences are ameliorated, that power can be positive and negative, depending on context, and that trust is a value present in these spaces, which contributes to supporting participant learning.

Participation

Issues of how, why, when and where people participate in communities of practice have been key concerns for CoP theorists. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), people initially join communities and learn at the periphery; the things they are involved in and the tasks they do have more or less immediate connection to the community. After gaining competence they become more involved in the main community processes and move from what is described as 'legitimate peripheral participation' (LPP) into 'full participation' (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 37). Lave and Wenger (1991) locate learning in the increased access of learners to participatory roles in 'expert performances'. However, there is also much to be learned from LPP roles. Wenger (1998) argues that learning activities have characteristic patterns, and LPP allows participants to view the whole enterprise. LPP demonstrates that CoPs can provide equal opportunities for participants to learn, that 'experts' come from a range of positions and, regardless of professional or other background, learning about the domain practice takes different people different periods to develop. Learning is, thus, not seen as the acquisition of knowledge by individuals so much as a process of social participation.

Lave and Wenger (1991) further elaborate on the issue of where people participate in their discussion of boundary working. It is to a discussion of this theme that the article now turns, before exploring the case study material in relation to CoP theory.

Boundary working

Roberts' (2006) position that knowledge aligned with predispositions of a community, which supports the identity and practices of its members, is more likely to be adopted than knowledge that challenges identity and practice, provides a focus for debate in the CoPs literature. However, attention to what happens on the boundary of people's practices and identities is also seen as a key feature of CoPs, as this is where a great deal of learning takes place (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Individuals within CoPs can spend much time acting, working and thinking at the boundaries between their own knowledge and identities, and those of others. The CoP literature emphasises ways to manage different perspectives, and help people cross boundaries. This includes the construction of 'boundary objects' (Wenger, 1998, p. 105) which 'create points of focus around which the negotiation of meaning becomes organized' (Wenger, 1998, p. 58).

A related idea developed by Wenger and Snyder (2000) and Wenger et al. (2002) is 'boundary spanners' – individuals who span different 'worlds'. This role creates connections between people from different organisations, cultures, sectors or localities, brokering and translating varying perspectives, and facilitating the application of ways of seeing and doing across different domains.

Having briefly outlined the conceptual terrain, the paper now considers the empirical data in relation to the issues introduced.

Power

CUPs by their nature rely on knowledge produced under different conditions, and the divide between propositional and experiential knowledge is stark. Using a CoP framework in CUP work ought to address such historic power asymmetries, which do not just exist over the production and validation of knowledge, but are present in real or perceived inequalities over space, professional status, resources and privilege.

Practitioner and parent membership always outweighed that of academics in our case study CoPs; however all CoPs were co-organised by an academic, hence the potential for privileging Mode 1 knowledge (Gibbons et al., 1994). Consequently, from the start, it was considered important by the convenors for facilitators to support the expression of CoP members who might feel subordinated and attention was paid to creating dialogic space. One way was to ensure that the CoPs were facilitated by community workers rather than academics. Another was to ensure that numbers were distributed so that parents or workers from any sector were not attending alone. However, there is no clear evidence that this approach was better than having an academic facilitator or distributing the CoP membership differently.

It is hard to disagree that equal distribution of stakeholder groups would go some way towards members feeling powerful enough to contribute, and it is in the spirit of CUP work to provide opportunities for different members to lead. For Wenger (1998) such engagement transforms 'communities, practices, persons, artefacts through each other' (p. 175). And in this regard, engagement is an interesting dimension of power: it affords the power to negotiate our enterprises and thus to shape the context 'in which we construct and experience an identity of competence' (Wenger, 1998, p. 175).

In the first CoP, parents were involved in domain-related training with the convenors prior to joining the CoP, and were very able to contribute and make use of the experience. This contrasts with the experience of parents in the third CoP who neither knew each other, nor had any prior involvement with the convenors, and were consequently slow to speak out.

Deciding the most appropriate venue for CoPs to meet is also relevant here. University facilities were used, largely to reduce costs, but also to help make university campuses more accessible and, in the eyes of some participants, to elevate the activity. However, again, the latter may have unintentionally reinforced the primacy of Mode 1 knowledge (Gibbons et al., 1994) and academic knowledge capital.

The CoPs were trying to work to Mode 5 knowledge and with the exception of the peer-reviewed element, there are clear examples of where this was achieved: one academic in the first CoP asked a parent member to undertake domain-focused teaching with her on a university course module, a small group of members from different stakeholder groups collaborated to improve a particular practice and a number of 'buddying-up' partnerships co-delivered project work together.

Despite attempts to prompt discussion and create a space where knowledge-bases were explicitly talked about and given equal status, it was difficult to engage the CoPs in dialogue about power differences. With the exception of individuals with traditional managerial responsibilities, there was reluctance from members to identify themselves as more powerful than others, and a preference to align themselves, irrespective of their role, with inclusive, respectful practice. This may of course have been a feature of this particular 'social care' domain.

Such connections back to participants' experiences outside of the CoP space bring us to consider the realities and interconnections of people's identities, experiences and actions that relate both inside and outside of the CoP. One way of framing these dynamics is to draw on Bourdieu's concept of 'field' in which 'to think in terms of field is to think relationally' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 96), with individual actors' positions in a field determined in part by the actor's 'habitus' and capital (social, economic and cultural) (Bourdieu, 1984). Fields mediate the relationship between social structure and cultural practice and frame a social arena of struggle over the 'appropriation' of certain types of capital and are constructed according to underlying 'norms' or principles. And thus, as in relation to Foucault, actors are able to take up positions of both dominant and dominated in relation to the exchange of capital.

Many workers explained that they were nervous about revealing what they might not know in front of the 'service user', parents. However, parents (less so the foster carers) feared making themselves vulnerable by being too open. Academics were often less forthcoming about their expertise than expected by facilitators. Finding creative ways to encourage the sharing of perspectives on power is potentially of great importance, because power differences do express themselves throughout the life of CoPs. For example, in the first CoP, parents were at times so busy giving voice to their experience that it was difficult for others to disagree or offer an alternative view for fear of appearing to disrespect their contribution and academic rivalries surfaced occasionally. Sometimes individuals unintentionally silenced other CoP members with their eloquence which, however, was not always reflective of an individual's status outside the CoP. Members of one time-limited CoP were awestruck by the contributions of a parent, despite parents often perceiving their own identity as the most precarious and low status.

One of the notable elements in each of the four CoPs is that there were many such occurrences that disrupted conventional narratives of how people are perceived and the positions they play in society. These can surprise people and 'trick' them into questioning their own, often long-held and unconscious, knowledge hierarchies and practices. CoPs can be places that allow people to perform and to come across in different ways. This is a key potential of CoPs for supporting KE in contexts like CUPs where knowledge hierarchies are historically embedded, and straightforward challenge does not always work. Given this potential, and the fact that continuity and trust are features of social learning spaces (Wenger, 2009) that help to minimise formal organisational power differentials to allow experimentation and KE, it seemed important that the time-limited CoP meetings took place regularly each month, and early meetings focused on building group safety and cohesion. In the main, continuity and trust were fostered in each of the time-limited CoPs; however, sometimes the differences were too great. For example, one particularly uncomfortable CoP meeting saw participants with conflicting interpretations of a practice situation unable to resolve their varying perspectives, and on another occasion members disagreed about whether to focus on the domain or the group dynamic, leading to doubts amongst some about whether or not to continue. In the fourth ongoing open CoP, the capacity for joint enquiry into practice despite differences in power positions seems high. Now into its third year, this CoP has created a culture of exchange by providing a platform for academics, practitioners, parents, young people and service users, to present and discuss issues related to the domain. This may be related to actors now adopting different positions in a field of power and knowledge capital which may be affected by the transformative nature of engagement in learning and social practice that Wenger identifies.

Convened by academics and practitioners, it successfully engages individuals from very different perspectives. This may have come about because it functions as a broader holding space with no rigid membership and no commitment requirements; people come when they please. While this can make developing depth problematic, it does provide a space in which many people are engaged and confident to speak out, in keeping with Mode 5 knowledge production. On the other hand, this CoP may be operating well as a KE vehicle because it is overtly advertised and organised by the university, so that participants assume the quality on offer will be of a 'high educational standard'.

Coleman and Dionisio (2009) argue that if translation works well, the new configurations of knowledge that arise are less likely to reproduce simply the concepts and concerns of historically asymmetric relationships. Atalas (2006, p. 82) sees this kind of process as one involving 'alternative discourses' which leads to the reconstruction of social discourses that involve the development of concepts, categories and research agendas relevant to local conditions. In this way, greater scrutiny is given to themes of knowledge and power and how the politics of knowledge affects the framing and dynamics of mobilisations, as well as the deployment of information in struggles over meaning and interpretation (Leach & Scoones, 2007).

Power differentials then clearly exist in these CoPs and despite a number of different arrangements across our four examples they are difficult to challenge directly. The action of power in process in these spaces can both deter practice at the same time as validating the enterprise. However, our case studies illustrate that the nature of these CuPs does demonstrate ways in which power differentials can be accommodated and moderated if trust between members is cultivated. Such an abandonment of historical 'archaeology' (see Foucault, 1969) which this engenders can have significant consequences for how to approach, understand and give rise to new discourses that may be incubated within the CoPs considered here.

Participation

Lave and Wenger (1991) talk of a CoP process where members learn at the periphery and gradually move closer to the core as they gain confidence to fully participate. All four of the CoPs in this case study set out to include members with diverse perspectives and roles. Individuals' different but equally legitimate expertise was openly acknowledged from the start, and as discussed above, exercises were developed to assist members to identify and share what they had to offer. However, it was surprising to notice how frequently members held back. Not allowing enough time for group trust to develop might partly explain this reticence. Introducing a common goal for a particular standard of practice may have aided participation, although this would have risked causing anxiety for less-confident participants. No ideal standard was set for what constituted a full-fledged domain-competent practitioner. Therefore, there was no specific identity that CoP members were honing through participation, or measure to gauge full participation in the practice of the CoP. Acquiring sufficient understanding of working with socially excluded children and families, and being able to pass that on to others, was the informal benchmark.

In the three time-limited CoPs, a range of participation opportunities was created by the facilitators. For example, individuals, pairs or small groups of CoP members had signed up to the expectation that they would plan a project involving the application, critique and/or development of the CoP learning in relation to their own practice, which they then presented to the group, seeking constructive critique and input. Members reported this activity as giving them the impetus to develop in-depth understandings of the domain, and, for some, to innovate ideas for dissemination and/or development.

However, a minority were resistant to participating in these expert performances, and seemed to put little effort into their presentations. Inverting Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of LPP discussed above, facilitators identified what might be termed 'Illegitimate Peripheral Participation'. CoP members participating in this way gave little to the group and were, in the facilitators' opinion, superficial in their work. For them, it seemed that mutuality, one of the key features of a CoP, was lacking. There is little in the CoP literature that helps to explain or creatively manage the group dynamic that this can generate.

While all three time-limited CoPs discussed and agreed group rules, only one CoP explicitly discussed how members might fail in their duty to the collective whole and although most established clear expectations of members at the start, sanctions that held others accountable were not absolutely applied. The convenors hoped that the CoPs would self-manage over time as trust grew. It was never considered that core members might drift to the periphery. In applying a CoP approach to CUP working, what counts as illegitimate, as well as legitimate, peripheral participation, how much illegitimacy can be tolerated and what it means for the core if there is drift to the periphery are all concerns. An awareness of LPP potentially enables CoP organisers to relax over different modes of participation, and establish different kinds of spaces accordingly. For example, the fourth CoP has an open and wide membership, and there is no obligation to attend every time. Given that this CoP takes less effort to organise, the convenors are more tolerant of peripheral participation in all its forms than in the time-limited CoP.

The other key issue regarding participation in CoPs concerns the domain knowledge level of the CoP members. In the first CoP, members were learning about the domain as they engaged with it and each other, which might explain the slow pace with which members embraced the work and critiqued the theory and practice. On the strength of this experience, planning for the second and third CoPs was adapted to include training sessions at the start, to ensure members held a similar level of domain knowledge before future meetings. This seemed to aid participation; members joined in discussion more quickly and produced similar levels of outputs, despite the duration of these CoPs being half the time of the first.

The time-limited CoPs enabled participation by creating opportunities for members to express anxieties about being in a group with mixed membership. In the third CoP, most of those involved held only one worker identity and some were concerned that they may not fully appreciate the parent perspective. In another CoP, some practitioner members held no parenting experience and were worried that they may be viewed as ‘fraudulent’ when trying to examine ways of supporting children and young people. Parents expressed concern that having never embarked on formal study, they would not be able to ‘keep up’, and were intimidated by the presence of academics, whilst some academics expressed concern that their knowledge-base may not be relevant to others. Such perspectives give rise to questions of how the ‘gaps’ between these positions may lessen and that these different knowledge positions can begin to recognise each other.

Thus far, this article has considered the practices of people with singular identities. The following section concerns a mode of enabling and sharing learning that can be seen by focusing on working at the boundaries of people’s practice, including by those with more than one identity relevant to the domain.

Boundary working

One of the key attractions for adopting a CoP approach is its promise for bringing different perspectives together to consider a common problem, with the aim of finding solutions. Working at the boundaries of people’s practice, boundary spanning different worlds and creating boundary objects were all clear features of this CoP case study.

It is not hard to imagine how bringing parents, academics and practitioners together to examine working practice might create considerable rethinking or realignment of views and practice application, as Lave and Wenger (1991) predict. However, the complexity and level of activity at the boundaries was quite surprising. Two types of boundary activity were observed. First, members were working across boundaries inside the time-limited CoPs as they communicated and learnt about each others’ approaches; second, they were also working across boundaries outside the CoPs, as they engaged in discussion or tested learning with colleagues and family contacts who were not CoP members. This second outside boundary activity generated an unexpected demand on the time-limited CoPs that is not mentioned in the CoP literature. The CoPs and, probably more accurately, the domain with which they were working, grew in popularity as members interacted outside the CoPs, and generated interest and enthusiasm with outsiders, who wanted to be involved in some way. Requests for information, seminars, training, advice, consultancy, etc. increased to the point that creating a fourth open CoP was considered one way of helping to manage demand. However, while the fourth CoP is well attended, it only goes part of the way towards this end. As mentioned earlier, some CoP members have felt able to give talks and workshops, and convenors look out for people to take on this function. However, most do not get involved, because they have other priorities or fail to acquire appropriate understanding of the domain to match the requests received.

This CoP case study confirms Lave and Wenger’s (1991) view that boundary spanners are particularly important in CoP work. Individuals who can bridge different worlds because they have experience of them all can help manage differences positively. For example, in the first time-limited CoP a few members with parent identities were sceptical about the value of getting involved; however, noticing that at least two individuals were both academics/practitioners *and* parents demonstrated the capacity to cross and incorporate different worlds, and generated a sense of trust and validity for parent members. Interestingly, Roberts’ (2006) belief that knowledge aligned with predispositions of a community, which supports the identity and current practices of its members, is more likely to be adopted than knowledge that challenges current identity and practice, was confirmed in this study. The very essence of these case study CoPs was designed to challenge usual practice by drawing on and incorporating different ideas and approaches. The CoPs brought different perspectives together to consider ways to support socially excluded children, and while the three stakeholder groups held in common an interest in the problem, they lacked a shared identity or practice. In hindsight, more thought could have been given to the role of boundary spanners in this regard. In the first time-limited CoP, one individual held all three stakeholder identities and when it came to task and role, some other members of the CoP expressed a resistance to blending identities and practices – they wanted this individual 'boundary spanner' to remain congruent with one identity or another, and not overlap them.

Curiously, the CoP made less demands on the other two CoP members who were both parents and practitioners and less conflicted about their roles. It may well be that what was observed was the CoP's high expectation of the academic identity, and their preference to protect its dilution with other practices. If knowledge that challenges current identity and practice is what is sought, then the presence of boundary spanners seems crucial, although it may be here that the tension involved in adopting new knowledge gets located; boundary spanners risk absorbing the frustrations and anxieties of the CoP.

The presence of boundary spanners was not always one of challenge. Individual boundary spanners were observed as key agents for creating straightforward links between different worlds. In the second time-limited CoP, one member was both a practitioner and a parent and translated theoretical concepts into everyday practice language and tools that others then adopted, and vice versa, practitioners realigned their thinking and practice as a result of gaining access to another world via the boundary spanners' contribution. In all three time-limited CoPs, a number of practitioners and parents engaged in joint project work which was facilitated by at least one boundary spanner.

In the first time-limited CoP, Wenger et al.'s (2002) positive spin on 'boundary crossing' (p. 153) was accepted because of the potential for people to look afresh at their own assumptions and create new 'landscapes of practice'. However, this was not always easy to achieve. The largest perceived mismatch in the practices brought to the CoP was during recruitment, where some felt they would not learn enough from others with a different practice-base to make it worthwhile joining, and the less convinced academics or community partners were uncertain about prioritising extra time and resources to work in this way. Little attitudinal shift occurred for those individuals who started out with such reservations when they joined the CoP.

Additionally the presence of boundary spanners did not aid boundary crossing in all areas. For example, even though an academic was also a practitioner and a parent in the first time-limited CoP, it was extremely difficult to persuade non-academics to read the literature. Instead, non-academic members relied on academics to translate the research-based messages for them, and considered this their particular offering. Consequently, thought was given to different ways to encourage reading, and in the second time-limited CoP members agreed to share out and summarise journal articles, with time allocated for discussion. People were further helped to cross boundaries that might have traditionally kept them apart by the construction of boundary objects. Having examined the CoP literature, considerable focus was given to co-creating things together as a way of developing learning and bridging differences – a shared language and terminology, materials and resources related to the domain, and ways of thinking that helped individuals connect with each other. Although this did not always work, it was useful for developing shared identities and practice. Often it was in the doing and making that more seamless boundary crossing was witnessed. For example, the first time-limited CoP drew on arts-based methods to construct a communal tablecloth representing members' individual understanding of the work; the second time-limited CoP facilitated members buddying to produce games to use in different settings by practitioners, parents or students, and the third time-limited CoP designed and tested exercises to disseminate their learning to their respective staff teams.

It would have been helpful to have given more thought to the critical role of boundary spanners and how to use their experience to bridge differences. Plus, to avoid group confusion, it would have helped to have been alert to the range of identities held by individual boundary spanners, in order to know which identity, practice or blend was being addressed.

Conclusion: the contribution of a CoP approach in mobilising knowledge for CUPs

The tentative conclusion of this paper is that the CoP approach has gone some way towards supporting mobilisation of knowledge for CuPs. A number of the original ambitions of the programme have been realised. For example, various stakeholders groups did come together and continue/d to meet, despite their differences. This fulfilled the convenors' goal of adopting a CoP approach to CUP work to establish working groups that cut across organisational and status boundaries. Furthermore, the largely affirmative findings of the small evaluations that have been conducted, and are currently ongoing (e.g. Aranda, 2011), suggest that those taking part have exchanged knowledge and realigned their thinking and practice in the process.

Support for the role of CoPs in CuPs can also be found by returning to the two original CoP objectives outlined in the introduction. All CoPs went some way towards creating a vehicle for KE that embedded learning and strengthened the capacities of university and community sectors to tackle entrenched inequalities and develop joint work. Knowledge was exchanged between very different stakeholder groups who would otherwise not have had the opportunity to share expertise and perspectives. CoP members freely chose to be involved and were eager, albeit sometimes nervous, to 'give and take' across knowledge boundaries. Further joint work between some is ongoing.

Regarding the second objective, the CoPs offered an opportunity for those involved to develop their own areas of work, springboarded by approaches already developed by the authors of this paper. As members planned project work to present, read the relevant literature in some cases, attended meetings, debated ideas or disseminated their learning to those outside of their CoPs, they developed further understanding of the domain and either affirmed their existing knowledge – building confidence and skills in the process – or acquired new knowledge.

The confusion in the CoP literature regarding CoP formation may prove a hindrance for their development in CUPs. The authors of this paper were originally attracted to the notion of organic formation – drawing in anybody who wanted to learn to solve particular issues together – yet, saw the need for cultivation too, a confusion which may explain why they failed to give sufficient attention to technical pedagogical issues, such as learning styles and teaching techniques. For the authors, a key goal of choosing to facilitate the CoPs was to lay appropriate foundations for a 'level playing field' in relation to whose knowledge counted. They wanted the experiential knowledge of parents to be taken as seriously as that of a worker, and for both knowledge-bases to be as valued as those of academics. However, they did not fully appreciate the need for a 'knowledge' foundation level to be shared within the CoPs. This was partially rectified after the experience of the first CoP, when they decided to move the 'formal training' element to the start of the next two CoPs.

It is clear that on reflection, the authors were mixing free-flowing and cultivated styles. Hence, they were over-optimistic about how much self-managing CoP members would do. Whilst many had passion for learning about and developing the domain, they valued the holding spaces created, and the dedicated time and training input from the convenors and from external speakers. The glue that holds CoPs together is the activity they undertake, which provides opportunities for the creation of shared knowledge, often impacting on people's lives and workplaces and needing careful support from CoP facilitators. Whilst there is much self-direction in CoPs, it seems unrealistic to expect them to flourish as CUPs without this.

Perhaps an organic self-forming and self-organising approach is more suited to CoPs focused on very new domains of interest. The CoP theory includes such an option and could be attractive to those wishing to create spaces that enable members to determine their own learning, welcoming dynamic group challenges that ensure that learning relates to real-world experience. However, there is little in the literature that points to how to create these spaces in practice (Hart et al., 2011).

The authors of this paper remain unclear about how CoPs assess or decide effectiveness of solutions or competency. In this case study, only one CoP set out to establish clear expectations at the start; however, it never occurred to the authors, or to CoP members, to set a standard by which to assess learning or competency. Even if this had occurred, some members may have baulked at the idea of implementing standards, given some would fail. The potential for an academic to ensure that developments adhered to the general evidence-base was discussed; however, this was never followed through, for fear of over-privileging the propositional knowledge-base and introducing traditional assessment and testing arrangements counter to valuing experiential knowledge. Wenger and the early CoP theorists identified this issue by acknowledging that people learn differently, with different competencies and capabilities. For example, Wenger (1998) saw maximising learning capability as requiring all sorts of transversal processes that cut across dimensions. But this notion remains undeveloped. Perhaps a further limitation of a CoP approach in the KM context is that the approach emerged through participant observation on largely mono-professional practice, rather than in the context of bringing together diverse participants. Hence, although theory supports the approach taken in the four CoPs, there is little in the way of empirical material and practice development texts to help move the technical aspects of KM forward.

Nonetheless, this paper concludes that CoPs may be valuable arenas in which to develop further KM approaches. We have used them explicitly to create spaces where people can take non-traditional positions. Within these spaces, individuals can draw on different starting points to define and develop democratic learning spaces for knowledge production and mobilisation.

Note

1. Mode 3 knowledge is dispositional and transdisciplinary, whilst Mode 4 denotes knowledge that is political and change-oriented (for further discussion of Modes 3 and 4, see Hart et al., 2007b).

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