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Communities *of/for* Learning: Enhancing student engagement in changing HE environments

David Simm¹ and Alan Marvell²

¹ Bath Spa University, ² University of Gloucestershire

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Structure of talk

- What are Communities of Learning (CoL)?
 - *student engagement and community*
 - *the challenges of the changing HE environment*
- Learning from Communities of Practice (CoP)
- Applying CoPs and Situated Learning to HE
- How communities develop practice
- What forms do CoLs take?
- How can CoLs be fostered/ facilitated?
- Adapting our learning teaching strategies
- Conclusions: evolving co-learning, Communities *of/with/for* Learning

Student engagement and community

- **Student engagement:**

“the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities which contribute directly to desired outcomes”

(Hu and Kuh, 2002, p.550, cited by Walsh et al, 2014)

- Role of social interaction in learning *(Walsh et al., 2014)*
- Academic partnerships develop between students and institution/ tutors/ course
- Viewed as a healthy and positive situation (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999) with pastoral, educational and TEF benefits

The challenges of the changing HE environment

- External and internal factors influence students' perceptions of study and expectations, affecting behaviours
- Students' versus Faculty expectations
- *“This dialectic has been falsely integrated into a dualist epistemology that reduces knowing and learning to either the individual or the collective pole”*

(Roth and Lee, 2007, cited by Emad & Roth, 2016, p.585)

What are Communities of Learning (CoLs)?

- Encouraging better student engagement through creating a sense of community and identity
- Shared knowledge, knowing, responsibility (Tinto, 2003)

Benefits:

- Student-focused ways of learning
- Peer support network
- Better academic outcomes
- Better student satisfaction
- Wellbeing benefits

Characteristics:

- Identity and belonging
- Engagement
- Commonality
- Collaboration
- Mutual network support
- Comradeship
- Willingness to participate
- Greater involvement
- Break down fear of internal competition
- Fosters co-production
- Confidence to set own agendas and goals
- Informal learning
- Potential to change the student-tutor relationship

Learning from Communities of Practice

- CoP – learners or practitioners in the same profession learn from each other, disseminating information and good practice
- **Situated learning theory** (Lave) - learning is situated, i.e. learning is embedded within activity, context and culture
- Learning through **social development** (Vygotsky)
- **Legitimate peripheral participation:** *“groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.”* (Lave and Wenger, 1991)
- **(1) Domain, (2) Community, (3) Practice**
- Through social interaction and collaboration learners become involved in a CoP which embodies certain beliefs and behaviours to be acquired
- Move from periphery to centre of community, novice to expert

Applying CoPs and Situated Learning to HE

- **Composition of members**
- **Motivations**
- **Authenticity**
 - Utilising real-world scenarios and data
 - ‘Quasi-communities’ in education through guest speakers and alumni (Mead & Roth, 2016)
- **Communities of Interest** (Emad & Roth, 2016)
- **Cognitive apprenticeship** (Brown *et al.*, 1989)
- Social participation
- Incidental not necessarily intentional learning

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What forms can CoL take?

CoLs may take many forms:

- traditional to new and innovative
- formal to informal
- structured to transient
- (a)synchronous interaction
- academic to pastoral

Formal:

- Peer mentoring
- Supplementary instruction
- Group projects
- VLE discussion boards

Informal:

- Study groups
- Online social networking apps
- Extracurricular, e.g. GeogSoc



How can CoL be fostered or facilitated? (not created?)

Attributes to be fostered:

- Identity
- Peer-peer interaction
- Connectedness
- Collaboration, not just co-operation
- Collectively motivated
- Sharing and respect
- Awareness and motivation of 'acting for others'
- Reflection

Issues facing Communities of Learning

- Encouraging community 'spirit' and 'endeavour' (Tinto, 2003)
- Collaborative learning
 - Mutual dependence
 - Requires participation
 - Active learning
- Naturally-forming versus artificial and/or constrictive?
- Self-selecting, cliques?
- Accessibility and inclusivity - inclusion versus periphery versus exclusion. Social integration is important.
- Collusion/ plagiarism, freeloading, lone workers

Learning and teaching strategies

- Creation of learning and support environments
- Adopting appropriate L&T strategies
- Existing good practice in Geography, e.g. active learning, fieldwork
- Role of tutor – facilitator, not creator
- Effective CoLs have:
 - Self-supporting groups
 - Active participation, e.g. in class
 - Friendships
- Changing tutor-student relationship, power shift
- Co-partnership opportunities
- Lifelong learning
- Identity and learning spaces – affiliation and appropriation ('third' space), communication.

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Conclusion: Evolving Communities of Learning

- “*Learning communities do not represent a ‘magic bullet’ to student learning*” (Tinto, 2013, p.6)
 - Student engagement is essential and has many benefits
 - Student engagement takes many forms, informally or formally
- **Communities of Learning** can stimulate ...
- **Communities for Learning** - students take possession and responsibility of their own (and others’) learning
- **Educational citizenship:**
“*norms which promote the notion that individual educational welfare is tied inexorably to the educational welfare and interests of other members of the educational community*” (Tinto, 2013, p.6)
- **Communities with Learning** (staff-student partnership)

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