‘Dear diary…’ – retelling women teachers experiences of participating on the periphery during placement training in the lifelong learning sector

Jane Jackson, Birkbeck College, University of London, UK

Paper presented at the 38th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 2-4 July 2008
University of Edinburgh

Reflecting themes of participating in adult education and learning, this paper [re]examines Etienne Wenger’s (1998) notions of ‘communities of practice’ and Lave and Wenger’s (2002) model of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ in the context of initial teacher training (ITT) for the lifelong learning sector. Drawing on new empirical data, this paper uses extracts from personal journals that were kept by women trainee teachers during their initial training to explore experiences on the periphery in post compulsory education and training (PCET). Trainees were engaged on a full-time (FT) programme of study, which comprised two days per week assigned to teaching departments for training in subject specific pedagogies.

Empirical phases saw 17 journals from women trainees within a single teaching institution being volunteered for analysis. These data represent 29% of the total women trainees enrolled in FT programmes from two academic years within one institutional provider of ITT. A distinctive feature of journal stories presented in this paper concerns the way in which they were collected. Individuals were not invited to participate in this research, or to submit personal journals that had already been written, for analysis, until after at least one term of training had elapsed. This approach meant that journal entries were not written by trainees specifically for this research endeavour, rather they were written as personal narratives and reflections on experience. Therefore, the insights represented here are indicative of personal standpoints. Significantly, for the wider PCET community in general and ITT in particular, these insights had, until now, been out of sight for PCET teacher educators and policy makers.

The stories [re]told through journals raised questions about current frameworks for placement training in PCET. The façade of supporting trainee teachers in placements through policies of guidance and mentorship is challenging and although not discussed in enormous detail here, the material presented in this paper aims to provide a flavour of some emergent themes. It is envisioned that ultimately, a critical re-examination of placement policies could be called for in light of these research findings.

Trainees experiences given voice through this research are retold in individuals own words. They are not positioned as responses to questionnaires or satisfaction survey’s. The information contained within the journals is closely connected with real-life and real-time experiences. Such rich data is worth listening to.

Training communities
The various communities that trainees join occupy orbital paths (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004) within the overarching institutional community (Wenger, 1998; Lave and Wenger, 2002). The institution is bound to a trajectory whose course interweaves with education practice from the wider pathways of PCET communities across the United Kingdom (UK). In addition, many local placement community pathways are interconnected with
communities beyond the educational domain such as wider communities of practicing artists, the health service, media and a range of other occupational domains. Therefore, when trainees join a teaching community of practice, there are many points of potential conflict and tension through which a novice teacher develops their practice style.

Wenger’s (1998) model acknowledged that communities of practice cannot operate in isolation from wider ‘historical, social, cultural, institutional’ contexts (pp.79), which might be viewed as an attempt (by Wenger) to accommodate the complex and messy natures of workplace communities. Certainly, such elements were the cause of conflict, tension and apprehension for some trainees. However, the separation of terms such as ‘cultural,’ ‘historical’ and ‘institutional’ does little to convey the entangled, multi-layered dimensions of influence such external contexts may have and in many cases they remained challenging sites of negotiation for trainees throughout their placement training.

The discussions in this paper reflect trainees’ journeys, inward bound trajectories towards gaining membership to various teaching communities. Lave and Wenger, (2002; Quinn, 2005) framed such positions as ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (pp.113). In these spaces, newcomers to a community participate in rather than observe community workings and in this paper, it is women trainees that occupy such spaces.

The Lave-Wenger (2002) model was useful because, in a Lave-Wenger sense, ‘old-timers’ are responsible in part for the kinds of experiences trainees meet with in placement and this was evident to some extent throughout the journals. ‘Old-timers’ guide trainees, whether intentionally or not, through transitions in professional identity and practice styles. Noteworthy at this point is my discomfort with the term ‘old-timer’. Not withstanding the ageist connotations that might be associated with the term, it is marginally more palatable than the sexist referents of ‘master-apprentice’ (pp.110), which is another designation the Lave-Wenger model uses for illustrating difference between established members and newcomers to a community. Such appellations rest uncomfortably with me, therefore, I offer (and adopt) the alternative phrase ‘established members’ as replacement for the problematic Lave-Wenger terms.

In making this change, I have shifted the context of the Lave-Wenger (2002) model because I have joined together notions of old-time and mastery, which does not necessarily follow. However, in the context of this research it is neither mastery nor length of service that is significant. Within this research it is relationships between established members, whatever their status, that have been found to impact on trainee experiences. In this research, established members are responsible for connecting trainees with community practices; they guide trainees from positions on the periphery towards central, inner workings of a community. The reality of trainee experiences were grounded in their interactions with established members, whether they had mastery of the context or not. In some respects, my disregard for differentiating between long-service and artisanship reflects a reality where long-service might be assumed to indicate competence, when, as some journal entries have shown, this is far from the case.

Unsolicited interventions

A recurring theme found across journals manifested as unsolicited interventions made by established community members. These interventions occur where trainees engaged in some form of community practice are subjected to interventions by established community members. Help, guidance or support has not been sought by the trainee on these occasions. Interventions are made at the instigation of the established community member. The first extract is taken from Paula’s journal where her feelings and reflections
were described poetically. She wrote:

Paula 22 October
The Horrors of the Photocopier
A monster
Which buttons do I press?
Sweating. Somebody waiting to use it while I try to pretend that it’s all under control.
I do know what I’m doing … really!
Afraid to keep asking
 Forget to clear what the person in front has been doing
DISASTER – what should be single copies come out double-sided.
What door? How do you open it?
Someone mentions …..
‘You seem to do a lot of copying’
(Oh no, they’ve noticed!)
‘Has no-one explained that you can send it over to College Print?’
…….Um …. No
‘But you do really need to do that in advance, …….. allow yourself a week.’
A WEEK!
I am barely keeping up ….

Paula’s writing offers an insightful reflection and I am drawn to making connections with Miriam Zukas’s work (2006), where she proposed that situated learning takes place beyond classroom spaces. This was evident in Paula’s experience at the photocopier. Paula’s nervousness is evident. Anxiety rises when an established community member arrives while she is working out how to use the equipment. The scene that follows sees Paula subjected to an oblique form of unsolicited intervention. Adopting a conversational style the established community member informs Paula that she is doing too much copying. This information is not passed directly; rather it is framed as an observation, yet. Paula recognises the inference, a subtext hidden behind the conversational exchange. The established community member skilfully positions Paula defensively; they then exert their power by offering further (useful community) information piecemeal. There is no indication that Paula is ever asked if she needs help. Rather the established community member inducts Paula unasked. Yet, as Zukas argues, events such as these have been neglected by ITT providers who focus on classroom practices. Journal data from this research, which is discussed shortly, has supported her view.

Lave and Wenger (2002 [1991]) note that a feature of peripheral working involves engagement with ‘technologies of everyday practice’ (pp.117) and the poetic extract from Paula’s journal offers some illustration of this kind of interaction in-action. This illustrative episode shows how engagements with community technologies are not necessarily events that occur in isolation. Newcomers may find themselves situated as negotiating between engagements with technologies and established community members, who might exhibit their own, different ideas as to how such engagements should happen. In the extract, the unsolicited training intervention continues where Paula is informed of an alternative way through which to access copied materials. Whether the intervention in the example was made as a means of support is unclear. It does serve to remind Paula however, of her newcomer status, her inexperience and her unpreparedness.
Across the data unsolicited interventions by established community members such as the one noted by Paula (above) were a regular occurrence. Many took place during teaching events and especially while trainees were interacting with students. For example Hannah writes in her journal:

Hannah 21 November
In front of the class the member of staff suggested that whilst working on the white board I try mixing the colours up and write much larger [next word scribbled out], possibly in capitals and not slanting diagonally…

This entry shows Hannah being initiated into community norms for board working protocols by a community member other than her designated mentor. Interesting issues arising from such extracts concern the function, values and aims underlying the advice being given. Guidance offered during placement training might be situated as illustrating where boundaries lie, to provide initiation for trainees into protocols for classroom practices that teaching staff are expected to follow within the community. This situates the focus for good teaching firmly within classroom spaces, much as Zukas (2006) has argued. In addition, journal entries show that advice is distributed by individuals other than those specifically being tasked as responsible for giving such advice, support and guidance, such as mentors. This has implications for future plans for mentor training.

In one sense, unsolicited interventions served to illustrate the ‘opportunistic’ nature of learning within communities of practice that Wenger (1998) writes about (1998, pp.267). It is possible that established community members are simply taking opportunities, as they arise, to support trainees’ developments. Yet, such interventions were not always welcomed by trainees. For example, Michelle wrote:

Michelle 6 February
The supply teacher told me to use the board in front of the whole class – I was really angry and irritated by this – what was she doing in the room anyway?

Once more unsolicited direction is presented to the trainee, in front of a student group by a community member that is not Michelle’s designated mentor. Significantly in this excerpt, the advice is delivered by another member of the community whose status might be viewed as being confined to the periphery rather than at its core. Yet, on some level this individual feels sufficiently powerful (in relation to Michelle) to comment on her delivery performance in front of students. From the journal entry it is unclear for certain what issues of power and compliance are at play during this event. Clearly there are issues of power which is evidence through both the unsolicited intervention and Michelle’s subsequent indignation.

Possibly the peripheral position of the advice-giving community member is what prompts Michelle’s ire. However, the precise nature and cause of Michelle’s feelings at the time of writing were unclear beyond the words shown in the entry. Rather like Paula’s encounter at the photocopier, the supply teacher’s actions in Michelle’s experience suggests some knowing about requisite, overarching patterns of practice that Michelle should follow.

In the context of this research, established community members seemed to be aware of particular teaching strategies that were preferred for practice in the community. These reflect guidelines for inspected teaching observations (Hill, 2007). It is unclear from journal entries why established members found it necessary to correct board work while classes were in progress rather than during feedback, reflection and review after lessons. This
causes me to urge for some careful rethinking for future mentor training in PCET. Such training needs to take into account that designated mentors are not always the individuals responsible for delivering information and guidance regarding subject specific pedagogies.

The actions of non-mentor interventions suggest some community anxiety that trainees conform to a set of practice norms and that students in receipt of trainee deliveries were not subjected to deviations from a community norm. Yet, as Zukas (2006) has noted, there is much to learn from engagements in teaching practice communities beyond the classroom, irrespective of discipline. In addition, I would venture that cross discipline engagements could be fruitful for trainees developing their own teaching practice styles, where practices from one discipline might be extrapolated and adapted for use in others.

Preparing trainees for placement

Accepting that journals showed trainees' personal perspectives, it was interesting to note similar and sustained messages across journals that did not necessarily relate to experiences in classroom spaces. This raises a possibility that there is some distance and misunderstandings between actions and intentions of established community members, teacher educators and trainees. In particular, journals indicated that trainees had not necessarily been prepared for elements of practice that extend beyond classroom spaces. Beyond engaging with technologies as Wenger (1998) suggested, trainees participating in this research were found to experience difficulties in overcoming and/or working through situations that served to deny access to areas of the teaching community. For example Michelle’s journal details difficulties in accessing resources:

Michelle 5 February
I asked Penny [mentor] about getting some photocopying done to hand out to the group. Penny said that I would need a code and that she could not give me a code because the department was already massively over budget = the result I had to pay to get all the photocopying done myself.

This kind of prohibited entry to community resources was not uncommon. In addition to staff training for supporting and developing trainees, it seems that there needs to be some agreements with placement providers prior to training that fundamental provision of resources would be made available. It seems morally wrong to cause a trainee to underpin departmental budgets in this way. I find it difficult to reconcile the expectation (and it was not an isolated finding in this research) that trainee teachers fund materials for students.

A further prevalent issue relating to community access concerned keys. Most journals included extracts similar to the example from Lorna’s journal shown below:

Lorna 29 January
Have no keys, it's becoming a joke!! Today, like everyday, I had to ask for doors to be unlocked/locked and waste time finding someone who has key. Obviously I am not trustworthy enough to hold a set of keys!

I have noted that issues relating to keys and access to resources were frequent occurrences across journals. Above, Lorna’s exasperation is clear, her position as a peripheral member of the community is reinforced through her restricted access to classrooms and staff work rooms. Her anger or incredulity in relation to her own trustworthiness is perhaps understandable, especially where her journal revealed that she was given responsibility for planning and delivering lessons, in addition to tutoring and assessing students. Lorna’s experiences and learning opportunities within the community
were overshadowed by the issues relating to keys, which is a pity.

In addition to physically denied access, journals showed instances of exclusion that denied trainees access to relevant and useful information. For example, from Amy's journal:

Amy Thursday 5 October
Arrived at the Ceramics Dept. about 10:15 am only to find there was no-one there. I did actually have lots of other things to do but did wonder if this was a general rule of thumb …

In this extract, Amy attends her placement to find no one present. Her not being informed of any changes to teaching schedules highlights the extremities to which the community have located her. This kind of neglect does little to support trainee's confidence, even more so during the early stages of training, such as the extract shown above.

Again, Amy's experience was not an isolated occurrence. For example Denise had written:

Denise 11 May
I went in to teach on the FDA but there was a trip … I stuck around for about an hour and then went home.

This casual approach to trainees’ attendances is something that needs addressing for future generations of trainees. Perhaps such experiences provide a realistic view of teaching in PCET but, I feel there needs to be more support. Journals showed that such exclusions can be damaging to new teachers. Confidence can be shaken by these events. Journal entries show trainees questioning their own abilities, their value and worth to the community and whether they want to continue in the profession. While such questions are a regular feature, a reoccurring part of the training process, it seems that instances of exclusion similar to those retold in journals serve to reinforce the peripheral and seemingly unimportant nature of trainees’ role, function and belonging within departments.

Journals were littered with examples of insecurities regarding where to sit during break-times and whether to approach department members. Therefore to face additional barriers to access, as discussed above, personal uncertainties are exacerbated, which can result in placement breakdowns as was the case for Amy subsequently, or in trainees deciding not to continue in the profession after training, that has been the case for some participants in this research.

**Conclusion**

This paper has given a flavour of women trainees’ experiences during placement training. It has indicated that trainees are receiving only partial introduction to practice experiences in many cases. Trainees face levels of exclusion and barriers to community membership in addition to being subjected to unsolicited interventions from community members. While during follow-up interviews trainees, on balance, found placement training extremely useful, their stories from individual journals and interviews revealed that there is much that teacher educators could be doing to enhance trainees’ experiences. While training for mentors might be at the forefront of ITT for PCET agendas, I call for much broader preparation and awareness of contributors to trainees’ developments across communities.

Analysis of journals did not reveal solely negative experiences. Many stories included retellings of positive occurrences, interactions and engagements but, these did not directly
correlate with the negative reports discussed here. In addition, there are some positive outcomes to be gained from negative reports; they offer those of us working in teacher education some useful insights for future developments in placement training. In this respect, it is important that trainee voices do not go unheard during ITT reforms in PCET.

References
Hill M (2007) LessonoObservation guide, Cornwall College, Quality Unit.
Quinn J (2005)' Belonging in a learning community: The re-imagined university and imagined social control', Studies in Adult Education 37, 1, pp.4-17.

This document was added to the Education-line database in June 2008