‘Legitimate full participation’ and career ‘trajectory’ questioned. Exploring the impact of the current employment situation on mature entrants to the physiotherapy profession.

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The context of the research

Until recently NHS staff shortages meant that physiotherapy students were assured of an NHS post as a physiotherapist on graduating. This is no longer so. Statistics showed that only 15-20% of the 1,523 graduates in 2005 found such jobs (Turner, 2006) and by the next year just 12% of the 2,238 graduates found a permanent physiotherapy junior post (Limb, 2007). This happened in the context of an earlier pledge from the government to train 59% more physiotherapists by 2009 (CSP, 2001), a crisis of funding in the NHS, the restructuring of the service through Agenda for Change, and widening participation in initial training. There was no robust evidence about what unemployed physiotherapy graduates did next or about their longer-term prospects of entering the profession. Contradictions were immediately evident. Despite policy and practice measures intended to help staff the NHS, anecdotal evidence of mid-course dropout and non-physiotherapy destinations suggested resources in initial training were being wasted. There were also fears that the situation might lead to a fall in recruitment to physiotherapy degrees, threatening a future recurrence of staff shortages.

The results of widening participation policies in higher education (HE) were of particular interest to me, for it was clear that numbers of mature entrants to the programme on which I taught had increased, including students with several years experience in other employment. Their difficulties in finding a first post considerably intensified the risk they had taken in making a mid-life career change to physiotherapy, since they tended to have more social responsibilities and less geographical mobility than younger students. Anecdotally there was evidence of graduates being forced to seek work outside physiotherapy, even having to return to jobs they had struggled to leave. So what was the impact on the mature graduates, a group that had made a particular commitment to the profession? My PhD aimed to explore this situation.

Methodology
A three year longitudinal interpretative study, centred on some twenty semi-structured interviews, was considered appropriate for gaining a holistic picture of individuals’ career paths in their social setting. It has allowed me to elicit subjects’ feelings, beliefs and expectations regarding their career choice, training and employment. Purposive sampling has been used (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998), concentrating on those of the mature undergraduate physiotherapy population who had a previous career prior to physiotherapy training. For basic participation statistics see Table 1 below. I am interviewing them three times, on the first occasion as they approach graduation, and in one and two years time thereafter. Thus their career paths can be tracked over the two years following graduation. The first interviews, very nearly completed, explore the students' previous occupations and their expectations of the future: the second and third will discover how they have coped in the present difficult climate of unemployment.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Age Range (on graduation)</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005-2008</td>
<td>29-43</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-2009*</td>
<td>39</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-2009</td>
<td>26-47</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-2010*</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age = 34</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note that two students have been held up in their progress through the course, which slightly alters the interviewing schedule. One student who hoped to have been interviewed had to abandon her training altogether.*

Six physiotherapy managers have also been interviewed to explore institutional issues and the local implementation of national policy in relation to recruitment and career prospects. Interviewing them necessitated seeking ethical approval for the research from the National Research Ethics Service (NRES) of the NHS and negotiating permission to interview from the Research & Development departments of each NHS Trust site. Because of interestingly different findings in interviewing a manager of a local Primary Care Trust, permission has been recently sought to interview two further such participants. Findings here suggest several changes in the field of professional recruitment.

**How Community of Practice Theory works well in Physiotherapy**

This fragile employment situation raises questions concerning current academic theorising on the dynamics of professional participation. In this area the Community of Practice (C of P) Theory, expounded by Lave and Wenger (1991), has become dominant
in today’s social research. Traditional learning theorists before Lave and Wenger had “conceptualised the learner as a receptacle of (taught) knowledge, and learning as a discrete cognitive process that largely ignored its meaning in ‘the lived-in world’ ” (Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson, & Unwin, 2005, p 50). On the other hand, anthropologists and ethnographers became increasingly interested in investigating the processes of learning as a social activity (Fuller et al., 2005). ‘Learning by doing’ did not adequately explain the organised way in which many apprentices were introduced to their work. Learners followed the steps of their predecessors, in a time-honoured path towards acceptance by their peers into their particular world of work. Lave and Wenger (1991) suggested that in reality the purely cognitive learning process attained a more social involvement: important to their participation was the fact that apprentices were allowed to do so situated within a community of practice.

Learning seen as a social activity

Vocational programmes, such as the physiotherapy one on which I teach, are not purely higher education (HE)-based academic degree courses; almost a third of the programme (1000 hours in the case of physiotherapy) is spent learning in the workplace, and in this respect they are good examples of the concept of situated learning. Lave and Wenger (1991) argued that the acquisition of knowledge was not just a matter of comprehending it: cultural and social context were all important. The simplest form of illustration of this might be physiotherapy students who can be taught how to facilitate stroke patients’ movement in practical teaching sessions in a university gym, but only really understand the actual problems when they are face to face with such a patient in the rehabilitation department of the hospital. Now the person afflicted by the stroke is before them, with their own specific symptoms and life history, perhaps with a carer present to expand on this context, and in a healthcare environment geared towards their management.

Apprenticeship ideals

More than this though, the students are now working alongside members of the profession they are aspiring to join, noting how these professionals conduct themselves and interact with the world around them. There is as much to learn in the staffroom as there is to learn with the patients. It is here that students hear the language of the community in context, as current professional issues are discussed. The new participant develops both a sense of what is expected behaviour and a sense of what actions would be deemed inappropriate. Lave and Wenger suggest that learning occurs “through centripetal participation in the learning curriculum of the ambient community”, rather than just by replication of the performance of, and instruction from, others (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p 100). The newcomers are steeped in the tradition of the community and are gradually drawn into this milieu with all its standards, controversies and tensions. Not only does this lift learning onto a new social level, but it implies a movement from the periphery of a community towards its centre, a progress towards ‘belonging’. As knowledge and experience is shared and discussed, confidence increases as the individual becomes more accepted as a reliable team member, support is gradually reduced and a specific place is attained within the C of P. This is the apprentice’s journey, the ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ discussed by Lave & Wenger (1991).
Learning is not confined to specific activities then, but involves becoming a type of person, being moulded to a social community. Novices gradually become “... part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p 53). Learning has to do with the construction of a person’s identity, transforming them, through “changing knowledge, skill and discourse” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p 122) into a practitioner, a full participant in the C of P. To achieve such a transformation is seen as liberating and motivational, and the authors finally argue that if an individual is “both member of a community and agent of activity, the concept of the person closely links meaning and action in the world.” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p 122)

**Legitimate peripheral participation preparing for full participation**

Thus far the notions of Cs of P work reasonably well for physiotherapy. Learning to be a physiotherapist is definitely seen as a social activity. Once on placement students do indeed gradually go through a transformation of sorts, which many find extremely motivational. They watch and then help their supervisors work with patients and soon try some of the more uncomplicated cases themselves. They are by no means expert, but are permitted to practice in this junior or peripheral position, always within call of more experienced practitioners and within the ambience of the professional community.

Lave and Wenger define a C of P as, “a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (1991, p 98). We’ve already seen how these newcomers slot into relationships with qualified staff, the way they become involved in performing skills and other activities, within the multifaceted world of healthcare in my example of physiotherapy. They also have connections to be explored with other health workers and yet are still linked to their HE institution, so the ties with tangential and overlapping Cs of P are in place and involved in the moulding of the individual as they move from novice to accomplished practitioner. What we’ve not yet looked at is the temporal element, and it is crucial, as over time newcomers move on to being ‘old-timers’ in their turn. They gain a gradual holistic view of the C of P and how it operates. Perpetuating the supply of such old-timers will help support the community, sustaining and invigorating its practice and work culture.

There is a certain order to the movement from novice to full participant here, a concept of “... an ongoing flow of reflective moments of monitoring ... organized around trajectories of participation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p 54). Learning accords with the best accepted method of progression; indeed protocols are often written to guide the learner on their path. By degrees work is built up, eventually attaining the completion of the whole skilled procedure. Often this is the way full participants have found it best to work through tasks. Practice doesn’t just mean what you do as an individual member then, but necessitates fitting in with a whole set of practices, revered customs and social relations that shape what individual practice becomes.

**How the theory works less well**

Hodkinson (2008) suggests two criteria should be fulfilled to ensure a good career theory, the first of which being that it “provides understanding that can valuably inform
research, policy and practice” (page 3). The C of P theory has proved successful in this. For example, qualitative studies have looked at what it is like to become a member of specific communities (Fuller & Unwin, 2003) and have examined shared community organisational structure (Ashton, 2004). It is in such ways that C of P Theory has become dominant in today’s social research. The theory does not fit so easily with Hodkinson’s second criterion, however, that it should be congruent with the ways in which career decisions are made and careers actually progress. The simplicity of this gradual gaining of knowledge towards full participation and the notion of a steady career trajectory towards membership of the community can be questioned on several counts that I shall now try to address, with examples from my early fieldwork.

Are newcomers always novices?
In the models of Cs of P Lave and Wenger (1991) instanced (among them midwives, butchers and, more unusually, alcoholics learning to control their addiction) their theory made very reasonable sense. It probably worked so well because the apprentices were all absolute novices and the alcoholics new to Alcoholics Anonymous, and thus the term legitimate peripheral participation was thoroughly appropriate. However, ‘novices’ to the C of P may have participated in a previous C of P, people like my mature participants who have changed careers, perhaps seeking new challenges or responding to unforeseen opportunities. Lave & Wenger (1991) don’t consider these people as I feel they ought. From their previous disrupted career paths my participants bring away expertise with disability (several within their own families) and with sport and sports injury; previous scientific training; performance skills; organisational talents and child rearing skills, among other life experiences. There are bound to be elements of learning which these people need only refresh or suitably adapt to the new situation.

However there is the possibility of their having atypical biographies, as far as their new C of P is concerned. Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest that communities tend to attract people of a certain basic type, be it only through tradition. In the past physiotherapists had the reputation of being white, middle-class females (Mason & Sparkes, 2002), but this has changed with the advent of widening participation in HE. From my own observation I suspect that there are more graduates from UK ethnic minority groups and more mature students from a wider spread of social class now; and I know there are many more men going into physiotherapy these days, than there were when I commenced teaching twenty years ago (Davies, 1990). What Lave and Wenger (1991) do not consider are the changes to a C of P that might follow when newcomers of different backgrounds break with the traditional entry characteristics. It is not just the mature participants that are going to be changed and moulded as they move from one career to another and on towards more full participation in their chosen community: there will be change within the C of P itself. It may well be that widening access to HE will see newcomers bringing novel concepts and altered methods to their C of P, as a result of their past experience. The current unemployment situation too has tended to result in changes to professional recruitment likely to impact on the C of P itself.

Preparation for the Community of Practice is ignored
Bourdieu is an author that provides commentary on this. He introduced the terms ‘habitus’ and ‘field’ which could usefully stand for individual background and situation. More specifically, ‘habitus’ refers to “personal dispositions and predispositions” (Colley, 2003, p 148). Every individual is born with traits peculiar to them, but also experiences the world from their own particular viewpoint thanks to their unique life experiences. Thus Bourdieu would see habitus as an important factor when a person choses their career, one making them more or less inclined to opt for a particular training. ‘Field’ refers rather to the particular context individuals are assigned to, or seek to position themselves in. ‘Habitus’ & ‘field’ together create a dialogue crucial to such life choices as those taken along the career pathway. Bourdieu agreed with Lave and Wenger (1991) in noting the importance of occupational milieu, describing it as “the reinforcement of dispositions … by a group that is homogeneous in most of the respects which define it.” (Bourdieu, 1986, p 104) Thus does he see habitus reinforced by field in the ideal career.

But suppose an individual’s habitus to be non-consistent with the field in which they find themselves. The implication is that it is then the job of educators outside the workplace, lecturers like myself, to nurture and inculcate the missing elements to link the two, for those who come from more diverse backgrounds than the ‘norm’ before ever they enter the vocational field. The formal educator of the novice is preparing their way into the C of P but has a strange relationship with the other full membership, held in respect but almost marginalised from practice proper. Lave and Wenger (1991) do not refer to this preparation time. As Hodkinson (2008) points out, becoming a member of a C of P starts long before the work placement, as the individual starts to enquire about the career, investigate different aspects of it, organises experience, talks to community members. C of P theory tends to concentrate on identity in relation to the workplace and ignores people’s wider life.

Fuller et al. (2005) have questioned whether in this respect the ‘situated learning’ notion of Lave & Wenger (1991) sufficiently considers the boundary which has been crossed to enter into participation in the first place. Sacrifices have been made: salaries have been slashed, opportunities foregone, personal relationships put under pressure, in order to follow the vocation of physiotherapy. Listening to their life narratives, it has occurred to me that these people are doing something quite brave, reminding me almost of Harold Lloyd in the old silent films. They’re stretching out from the security of their past ‘community’ and reaching precariously across the void towards a new membership. They are not complete ‘novices’, having been ‘full participants’ of a previous professional community, and they risk being denied full membership in the new community of practice they have chosen, thanks to current circumstances beyond their control.

More or less peripherality?

Another problem with Lave and Wenger’s theory is that not all legitimate peripheral participants in a C of P move from a more peripheral position to one of full participation. What Bourdieu refers to as the field of play is far too uncertain. Indeed if participants find little employment at the end of their training and become deskilled through lack of practice, it is conceivable that they might find themselves more peripheral, rather than participating more fully, in this fragile work environment. I recently interviewed such a graduate. David is in his early forties and, having an obligation to return to his family at
some distance from where he trained, found himself waiting to be interviewed, sitting opposite two local graduates twenty years his junior. A woman involved in the interviews came in and, turning her back on David, apologised to the two younger candidates, who were already known to her, for running so late. As he commented later to the remaining interviewee, “I’m going to be asked about communication by that lady in a minute. I could tell her something about how she could improve!” Hardly surprisingly he was not successful at this interview. Currently, one year post-graduation, David is back in the job he tried so hard to leave, marginalised from the C of P he should belong to!

In a job market that is so much less secure than in previous years, these are instances to be expected. A career is seen as likely to be more fractured along its course, the individual experiencing temporary contracts and periods of unemployment, rather than continuous working life (Collin & Young, 2000). Legitimate participants of a C of P can indeed find themselves dependent on the kindness of recruiting managers, or on the whims of policy makers and funding bodies. This is not the picture of situated learning that Lave and Wenger (1991) convey.

But today’s graduates are wise to this. Generation X children (born between 1965 and 1981) tend to see things very differently to their predecessors the Baby-Boomers (Collin & Young, 2000). The former show signs more consistent with portfolio-building than with the traditional steady career for life. They search for more independence and mobility, collecting snippets of useful experience as though preparing for that ‘rainy day’: they expect to have to demonstrate their flexibility and adaptability in an uncertain field. And this is how they are used by the managers in the C of P, as Bank workers, to fill the odd day or weekend when to offer a full-time post is out of the question. Virginia, a physiotherapy middle manager for a large hospital trust showed me how the traditional path of entry for graduates was changing.

“People used to think, ‘Full-time rotational Band 5 – permanent jobs’ ... we’ve been able to be flexible to what other people need as well. So some people have said, ‘Well look ... I’ve got a permanent job as a carer. I don’t want to give that up, because I’ve got a mortgage, but I could do Friday and I could do the odd weekend.’ That keeps them in.”

Managers too are struggling to cope in a game, the rules of which they don’t set. They have to maintain contact, however tenuous, with potential staff to contend with what happens in the field at all. Bourdieu notes the importance to the social scientist of watching the ways in which different social groups position themselves and, in the case of dominant groups, how they position others (Bourdieu, 1998). Lave and Wenger (1991)’s account of Cs of P is peculiarly free from these kinds of external influences and manoeuvrings.

Some strange new movements are occurring too. People play safe by moving sideways on untraditional career paths, choosing in effect to marginalise themselves in the C of P. The example among my participants is Eric who decided to move into teaching by studying a PGCE directly on qualifying as a physiotherapist. By combining physiotherapy with education like this he gives himself more options of employment, as well as allowing himself to combine elements of his two favoured careers, filling a gap he noticed on placement in a special school, where educators have been known to urge
therapists to promote a more fixed posture for a child to enable learning, rather than promote all possible normal movement. A person trained to see both sides of the issue in such an environment could be a godsend.

**Career ‘Trajectory’ Questioned**

The term ‘trajectory’ as a descriptor of movement along the career path must then be questioned. Rarely do my mature graduates’ narratives to date suggest such an ever upward progress. Collin & Young suggest that onward progression, or anything resembling trajectory, may give way to stagnation, as there is “no motivation to delay gratification, work hard, and invest in self-development” (2000, p 93) if the future cannot be predicted with any degree of certainty. It has to be said that this is not happening in the context of short-term contracts in the NHS, where hard work while in temporary employment may well be rewarded with permanent employment at a future date, and again the manager is delighted to make use of this.

But the term ‘trajectory’ suggesting a career path moving up towards some imaginary plateau is not particularly apposite and is too restrictive. It implies a kind of elevated stasis. Fuller et al. (2005) noted that in a thriving and developing professional atmosphere full participants in a C of P would be expected to continue to learn and to refine their skills. A community’s patterns of practice do not stand still, as Lave and Wenger (1991) sometimes seem to suggest, but are ever-changing, influenced by surrounding cultures, societal factors, even national economic issues, such as the present insecurity in the job market. As Hodkinson (2008) points out, becoming a member of a C of P starts long before the work placement, as the individual starts to enquire about the career, investigate different aspects of it, organises experience, talks to members. C of P theory tends to concentrate on identity in relation to the workplace and ignores people’s wider life and their initial journey.

Some authors have also spoken of the concept of trajectory as having “deterministic overtones” (P Hodkinson, Sparkes, & Hodkinson, 1996, p 145). Assuming an onward movement into a career is too like tempting fate. It is not a rational progress, nor totally controllable by the individual. Far too many influences may come to bear on an individual’s progression through their working life for it to be often so straight forward. Take the example of one of my participants, Barbara. She was not particularly successful at school:

> I wasn’t given the chance for ‘A’ levels. You were just sort of told, “No, you won’t achieve them.”

Before long she found herself pregnant and life seemed to close in on her:

> … it sounds awful but you fall into this stereotype of 17, having a baby, no job .. and it’s quite hard to get out of at that age.

Years later, working in a supermarket and dissatisfied with her life, she finds herself talking to someone her own age who is about to go to university.

> I was quite shocked. I thought, ‘Well, I didn’t think they’d take you, ‘cos you’re old.’
It started new trains of thought, and suddenly, an ambition from long ago was attainable. 

_There wasn't a lot of planning in it, I don't think; it was just a “That's a good idea! Let's go and have a look. I've done it!”_

Hodkinson (2008) speaks of the assumption that the career pathway is predictable and cognitive as ‘Folk Theory’. It doesn’t work like this in reality. Allowance must be made for an individual’s emotional feelings and inclinations, their ‘habitus’ to quote Bourdieu (1986), but also for changes in the predominating field, the individual’s horizons for action. What kind of obstacles get in the way of what they wish to do? All sorts of other influences impinged on the career paths of my participants, and are still doing so. Some, as students, clung to previous jobs in a part-time capacity, in order to maintain themselves financially and to ensure a modicum of employment at graduation in the worst situation. Some need to consider their dependents, or need to fit in with their partner and where their house or business is. One has to be aware of her own disability when she looks for work. More than just work issues are involved here.

**Review and amendment**

We have seen that Lave and Wenger (1991)’s theory has much to recommend it, but that it appears to be very work-orientated, and seems to ignore the individual’s wider social world. If we are to consider the individual holistically, we must consider a whole range of outside influences on the life of a participant, people and institutions not directly involved with their work at all. In particular the ways in which people choose their career path need investigating in conjunction with Lave and Wenger’s picture of ‘situated learning’. Blending Bourdieu’s ideas of habitus, incorporating social inheritance and natural inclination, together with the notion of field, giving a living context to the situated learning, might build a more integrated model of the whole process.

Whatever is agreed upon, further research is necessary for as Giddens (1991) has noted, in the modern world tradition has loosened its hold and choice of lifestyle is becoming a more important factor than ever. My task now is to give a voice to my graduates along their path to full participation, a route that may be anything but easy. One of them summarised the situation poignantly.

_“It’s quite demoralising really when you’ve done three years and an Access or ‘A’ Levels beforehand and then, you come to find a job .. and it’s quite a struggle really.”_
Bibliography


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