

Multiple professional identities: A personal exploration of the transition from nurse to lecturer

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Abstract

This personal reflective account explores my transition from NHS employee to university lecturer based in an Higher Educational Institution. Lave and Wenger's (1991) "Communities of Practice" (COP) model has been used as a framework to highlight both personal and professional development. The account is positioned within a landscape of performativity (Ball, 2003) perceived as a mode of state regulation, where individuals organize themselves in response to targets, performance indicators and the needs of the organization.

Key words: professional identity, personal reflection, professional development, transition, education

Key points

The Communities of Practice (COP) model provides a useful theoretical framework for analysing and understanding the shift in identity from one profession to another

Communities of practice sees the development of identity as situational (virtual or physical) and based on the social practices of a group of individuals sharing a common interest.

Being immersed in the social and cultural practices of a community contribute to learning and tactical knowledge required as a professional.

Identity can be viewed as an essentially constructionist process where meaning and reality is created rather than discovered.

Introduction

In this paper I examine my own transition of multiple professional identities in the National Health Service (NHS) (nurse, midwife, health visitor, community practice teacher, manager) to the more recent professional identity of lecturer in a higher educational institution (HEI). In order to examine the development of my professional identity (hereafter identity) I use Lave and Wenger's (1991) "Communities of Practice" (COP) model. Lave and Wenger (1991), credited with the original description of a COP, sees the development of identity as situational (virtual or physical) and based on the social practices of a group of individuals sharing a common interest. Wenger argues, there is a "*profound connection between identity and practice*" (1998, p149) and that being immersed in the social and cultural practices of a community contribute to learning and tactical knowledge required as a professional. The COP model provides a useful theoretical framework for analysing and understanding how my identity as a lecturer has been constructed through social experiences within the HEI. The terms teacher and lecturer are used interchangeably throughout the paper.

The Changing Landscape

In today's society identity as a teacher is being redefined across all sectors of education as the wider political and economic frame take into account a neoliberalist perspective of competition, markets and consumer choice (Ball, 2003a; Archer, 2008; Clegg, 2008). Students are viewed as customers and consumers and universities places of commercial exchange that commodify knowledge (Horton, 2016). Consequently, the lecturer role is changing. Stephen Ball (2003b p220) writes profusely on the "struggle for the

soul of the teacher” and how identities change in a process of reform where the focus, rather than on learning, is on policy and performance. As a result of this research interest in higher education has tended to focus primarily on academics’ experiences and responses to neo-liberalism (Harris 2005; Archer 2008; Clegg 2008;). In nursing, despite a significant shift in policy from the 1990’s taking nurse education from National Health Service (NHS) to university management, attention has concentrated primarily on the transition from nurse to academic and less on the impact of economic and social change. Evidence highlights that whilst nurses, appointed to academic posts, are experts in their clinical fields, hold strong practitioner identities developed through a process of professional socialization (Smith and Boyd, 2012) the shift to academia is challenging (Archer, 2008; Boyd et al, 2010; Gourlay, 2011). Academia or being an academic, seen as integrating the three elements of teaching, research and textual activity can for some be problematic. Whilst nurses moving into academia report feeling supported, motivated and ready to take on newer teacher identities, encompassing research and textual activity is perceived as much more complex and difficult (Archer, 2008; Boyd et al 2010). This is in line with my own experiences where teaching has been the dominant discourse within the COP I have worked in. Equally evident has been the impact of performativity, seen as a mode of state regulation, where individuals organize themselves in response to targets, performance indicators and the needs of the organization (Ball, 2003b). This can result in the setting aside of personal beliefs and values.

Anderson (2009, p.203) defines professional transition as,

‘The human experience associated with entering a new community of practice.....a dynamic, developmental process with associated emotional work, critical tasks, and a diffusion through role boundaries to assume the new identity with values and knowledge base for the new role.’

Communities of Practice

Identity as a concept is much disputed, seen by many as dynamic, changing and dependent on context (Bleakley, 2006; Cribb, 2005). Wenger, (1998, p151) sees identity as “the constant work of negotiating the self”, an essentially constructionist approach where meaning and reality is created rather than discovered. Crotty (2003) defines as,

“the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context”

(Crotty, 2003, p 6).

Others however see identity as *“relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role”* (Ibarra, 1991 pp. 764-765). Following twenty-five years in the National Health Service (NHS) where a constant reworking and reconstructing of identity has been required as roles and responsibilities have changed my own position sees identity as a continuum between the opposing views. Equally my own values and beliefs in how I view the world have remained relatively constant. Lave and Wenger (1991) describe learning and development as a process of *“peripheral legitimate participation”* as a way of understanding the shift from one identity to another, legitimate as individuals engage and participate in real world experiences and peripheral as there are less demands on time, effort and responsibility in the initial stages of a new role. Over time the individual realigns with the new ethos, vision and values of both role and organization through interactions with more experienced members of the community. In this way an understanding and knowledge of the lived experience in the new social and historical setting is assimilated and a newer identity constructed.

A particular focus on professional development in terms of teaching has been evident within my own COP. Boyd et al (2010) highlighted that of 146 academics from professional nursing and midwifery backgrounds the transition to teacher was more accessible than researcher. This was deemed to be the result of new lecturers holding previous senior posts that incorporated autonomy, teaching and mentoring experience, post graduate study and strong organizational ability, suggesting that as health care professionals they would hold many of the skills and attributes required in a lecturing role. Consequently, the acquisition of a professional teaching identity would be easier. In terms

of research and writing or textual activity experience was however limited. Routes into academia were mostly through professional routes rather than a doctorate resulting in those new to lecturing feeling less confident in their academic abilities and less credible than their counterparts. Even though formal and informal systems for academic induction were included the emphasis remained predominantly on teaching and learning. These findings have been reinforced by Gourlay (2011) who highlights that professional or PHD routes into academia impact on the socialization process and influence how academic identities are developed. In Gourlay's (2011) research, when participants from professional backgrounds were probed further about their orientations towards research and academic reading and writing the following themes emerged; confusion, inauthenticity and isolation. This was attributed to the invisibility and perceived inaccessibility of engaging and participating in research activities within a COP as well as heavy teaching workloads. A focus on obtaining a teaching qualification, essential in the HEI's quality assurance programmes was also noted.

Legitimate peripheral participation as a process has been apparent within my own COP, legitimate in that soon after my appointment I was participating in real life teaching experiences. Initially considering myself a novice teacher (Benner, 2001) I soon appreciated that whilst the context of work was very different (now an HEI as opposed to NHS) previous knowledge and skills as a practice teacher and manager were transferable. Rather than seeing myself as a novice I started to feel a level of "competence" (Benner, 2001) that was unanticipated and whilst acknowledging there was still significant learning in terms of teaching strategies, this gave me confidence and assurance that I could indeed do this. A very tentative, fragile and foundational teaching identity within an HEI was emerging. Equally, my identity as a health professional was strong. In a new educational community of practice, I recognized the opportunity to influence more widely those things I cared most passionately about, preventing ill-health, reducing health and social inequalities and improving child and family outcomes. Rather than seeing health and education as separate entities with different epistemological underpinnings the value of understanding both and to some extent "bridging" the two gave me new founded benefits within my own community. Wenger (1998) argues that when individuals bring what they have learned from one community of practice into another it is in fact "*brokering across boundaries between*

practices [and] they are able to make new connections across communities of practice" (Wenger, 1998, p109). If they are good brokers, then new possibilities are opened up which contribute to and benefit the COP.

Within the COP there was also an appreciation that as I immersed myself in many of the teaching aspects of the role I could at times choose to remain on the periphery, (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and indicate the pace at which I "learnt the new ropes" (Gourlay, 2011, p 67). Having some autonomy to set my own pace was a particularly helpful process and as an activist (Honey and Mumford, 1995) and experiential learner (Kolb, 1984) highly congruent with my learning style. In addition, having significant experience in shifting roles I was confident in seeking out opportunities that supported my own learning needs and voicing what was and what was not helpful. Moreover, recognizing that the field of education was also (as in health) constantly shifting and evolving was a reassuring and familiar process. This ensured that whilst the process of becoming an academic was not in any way smooth or linear I was secure in asking for help and support within my own COP.

I was also aware in the early part of my transition that there was significant pressure on the programme to perform and although as a more inexperienced member of staff I was at times, able to circumvent any pressure by remaining on the periphery there remained in the team and department overall palpable pressure to achieve. Performativity perceived as a negative concept (Ball, 2003a) calls for increased teacher accountability with subsequent monitoring of performance. Wider economic policy change within the context of public health nursing had also resulted in large student numbers entering the programme. The transformational "Health Visitor Implementation Plan 2011-2015" (Department of Health, (DH) 2011) had resulted in two large student intakes a year as well as delivery across two settings. This was significant in having considerable impact on teaching workloads and responsibilities within the team as well as raising the visibility and profile of the programme locally and nationally. Large workloads and shared aims resulted in a strong sense of belonging, of participation and collaboration, central themes in the Lave and Wenger COP model (1991). However, whilst my learning at that time was very acute, pressure to perform and get this right was also high on the agenda, placing considerable stress and responsibility on the lecturers and team. The fast and furious pace of policy enactment, whilst enabling a

more improvised apprenticeship (Lave and Wenger, 1991) as a newcomer was also demanding and at times emotionally draining. Bernstein (1996) highlights identity as reflecting external contingencies rather than emerging from knowledge and practice. Undoubtedly high expectations and significant scrutiny led to feelings of insecurity and uncertainty in responding to external stakeholders. Perceptions of feeling constantly judged and called to account resulted in something Ball (2003a, page 220) calls “ontological insecurity”, a questioning of whether things are being done well and in the right way, a constant state of instability. As a COP some of this was visible however in terms of how this was experienced as a new lecturer I believe is complex. Accommodating new knowledge and skills within a context of performativity was possible, however there was also at times a sense of “fabrication” (Ball, 2003a, p224), a feeling of presenting a version of a programme that was not always quite true, but driven by the need to achieve and succeed. Ball (2003a, p 221) highlights a kind of “values schizophrenia” where the *“commitment, judgment and authenticity within practice are sacrificed for impression and performance”*. Whilst I believe this was not always conscious, suggesting that in the formation of our identities some behaviours in the socialization process are so embedded they become the very fabric of who we are, I can see that at times this was how I perceived the situation.

Whilst there is a suggestion that as teachers we can either reject or resign to the impact of performativity, as a concept this maybe too polarized. In transitioning from health professional to lecturer despite the recognition of the impact of a performative culture I felt that within this context there was simultaneously room for autonomy and initiative. Consequently, there remains the recognition that there are times when the processes and functions ingrained within a performative culture distract and divert attention from teaching and learning. Lyotard (1984), cited in Ball, (2003a) highlights the “law of contradiction” where the intensification of first order activities such as engagement with students and curriculum development become subsumed by the demands of performativity or second order activities. The ‘costs’ in terms of time and energy of second order activities impacts significantly on first order. Adapting to a performance-based approach however is not new and has parallels with the health sector where targets and a performance based culture has been in existence for some time. This to some extent has been the culture and communities I have always worked within and whilst questioning and challenging certain

aspects that I might not agree with, has also become part of what I see as the current climate. Equally, I remain optimistic that as a teacher I have autonomy and agency to “act” as I see appropriate in any professional context. Lingard and Sellar, (2013) talk about “performative resignification” as a mode of agency for mitigating negative effects of performativity and Braun, Maguire and Ball, (2010, p 549) highlight the “creative processes of interpretation and recontextualisation” as a means of negotiating experiences that may not fit with one’s own values and beliefs. In November 2015, the Government published its Higher Education Green Paper “Fulfilling our potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice” (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills) with the main aim of raising teaching standards, providing greater focus on graduate employability and widening participation in higher education. Plans to introduce a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) are already underway and will have significant impact on the sector overall. Rather than elevating teaching status on a par with research as intended critics see the framework as a means of drawing teaching into compliant institutional norms where increased scrutiny and value on performance reduce autonomy and independence (Convention for Higher Education, 2016). The authenticity and individuality of a teacher may be replaced by a “plasticity” (Ball, 2003b p 225) as the organization replaces genuine social experiences with an increasingly judgmental culture, valued for productivity and its contribution as a marketable business.

Whilst performative discourses can be construed as denying personal agency through their emphasis on instrumentality (Wilkins et al, 2012) within my current COP I have observed behaviours that enable lecturers to be active and co-construct their own reality, sometimes resisting and sometimes negotiating policy agendas (Osgood, 2006). Sammons et al (2007, p. 694) highlight that teachers in these instances need to be resilient and maintain a strong sense of vocation and motivation in order to do this. Equally however I have seen colleagues disillusioned by the lecturing role and the constant need to perform to improve student experience and performance tables.

Understanding the development of my own identity through Lave and Wengers (1991) COP model may be too simplistic. Despite the COP acting as a vehicle for collaboration and enabling the translation and transmission of tacit knowledge and an

understanding of professional behaviors in teaching, my own agency as an existing health professional and ability to “broker” was evident. The epistemological framework of Belenky et al (1986) builds on the work of Perry (1970) recognizing that in knowledge multiple perspectives exist and that in being female ways of knowing are more likely to encapsulate the concepts of care, responsibilities and connectedness rather than rights, autonomy and separateness, as in being male. The framework takes into account the influence and impact of individual background and experience helping to understand how ways of knowing are incorporated into who we are today and how our identities are constructed. In terms of choosing a caring profession and having an interest in how practitioners build and develop therapeutic relationships with those they work, the work of Belenky has been illuminating in how I see myself and how I too am positioned in society. Equally this helps in highlighting that whilst identities may be dynamic and fluid (Wenger, 1998; Bleakeley, 2004; Cribb, 2005) relatively stable attributes can also remain core. More recently Colley and James’ (2005 p 12) highlight that

“professional identities and trajectories are inseparable from personal and political identities and trajectories. There is certainly no such thing as teacher separate from the complex, wide lives that [professionals] have lived and are living”.

The reciprocal relationship between structure and agency is much debated. Bathmaker (2005) draws attention to this conflict in her critique of Lave and Wenger’s model suggesting that tensions between accommodation and agency are inherent. On the one hand the model highlights that knowledge in practice develops from absorbing and being absorbed in the culture of practice and the structures within the workplace yet simultaneously as newcomers there is the dilemma of aspiring to develop new ideas and innovation whilst also engaging in existing practices.

The implications of my own experiences and interactions within the COP are important in understanding how identity is shaped and how my own authenticity and legitimacy as a teacher is formed. Existing structures within organizations need to be negotiated and navigated. In a study to understand the nature and formation of contemporary academic identities Archer (2008) considered how younger academics in the

UK positioned themselves with regard to both “authenticity” and “success” as academics. The study highlighted that new academics’ experiences were constrained by a number of structural factors that included race, social class, gender and age. The current performative ethos was also identified as significant. Despite the younger academics growing up in the 1980’s, as “Thatcher’s children” (Archer, 2008, p 265) and an assumption that they would be more familiar and accustomed to the processes of new managerialism there was still evidence of some disillusionment and distress, emotions that were further substantiated by Davies and Petersen’s (2005) work. Furthermore, although there was some confirmation to highlight that young academics can resist the pressures of performativity, evidence of structural constraints impacting on their identities was present. Participants reported feeling “inauthentic” and a sense that they did not belong in the middle class habitus of the university, “*I try to be posh-ish....so I work on my p’s and q’s*” (Archer, 2008, p 394). Equally young female lecturers talked about how a youthful appearance was implicated in them being positioned as a novice (Archer, 2008, p 392) and of being immersed in a setting where “dominant masculine values and practice within the academy prevailed” (Archer, 2008, p394). Coming from a working class background where academia has not been prominent and having taking a non-traditional degree route (open university) I am at times acquainted with feelings of inauthenticity and a sense of not belonging. This is more often experienced when I am away from my immediate COP and attempting to understand other fields of work in the HEI. This is particularly true in terms of research and scholarly activity where my knowledge and understanding is more limited and equally in terms of my own agency, have as yet not engaged. Lynsey Hanley (2016) in “The Experience of Class” highlights a particularly momentous decision in her life to choose the path of education and what was again seen as a middle class world,

“I had to avoid falling into the void between two worlds, the working class world and the middle-class world. I had to choose between rooms”,

(Hanley, 2016 p 37).

In choosing the latter her book highlights the many challenges she has faced along the way in her bid to raise her own social capital (Bourdieu, 1991) and sense of identity. I

recognise in Hanley's account many similarities in my own journey, attempting to feel a sense of belonging and authenticity in the much wider community of practice, the institution and equally the more extensive community of academia. Hanley (2016, p 48) explains this well in stating,

"a common tendency among the socially mobile is to feel always that they are living the life of Riley, but on borrowed time: that at any moment someone is going to tap them on the shoulder and tell them it's time to go back"

This has at times been an unwelcome but familiar feeling yet as I become more engaged in the COP and my own knowledge and experience increases I am aware of my own social capital increasing, learning from others, building supportive relationships and starting to feel that awaited sense of belonging. Three years on I find there are moments where I believe I have achieved "self-actualization" (Maslow, 1987) and that the HEI and lecturing have become very much part of who I am.

In this paper so far I have explored a number of the benefits of Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated model of learning and how my own identity has emerged within a COP. However, in recognizing the socialization process as important in identity formation and success as an academic, attention has also been drawn to some of the negative aspects of communities. In Gourlay's (2011) study of new academics features of "shared repertoire", "mutual endeavors" and "expert-novice interaction", the essential positive elements of a COP (Lave and Wenger, 1991) were not apparent. This was supported by Bathmaker (2005) who, rather than identifying features of participation in existing communities, found that trainee lecturers in a further education college were often marginalized and alienated. Contact time was predominately with mentors and work based assessors rather than shared experiences and time with wider staff based in the community. Marginal time was spent at staff meetings or in more informal interactions with the result that trainees reported feeling like "outsiders" (Bathmaker, 2005, p 20). Sharing experiences and spending actual time together in order to build relationships is not always evident and can result in individual's feeling isolated, confused and frustrated in their role.

Personal experiences highlight very clearly that building relationships and taking time to get to know each other can break down barriers, support mutual understandings, encourage, and facilitate a sense of belonging. Understanding the epistemological traditions of different disciplines is important in ensuring previous knowledge or ways of knowing are also valued and recognized within the community (Malcolm and Zukas 2007). In examining transitions and teacher identity formation authors identify a myriad of emotions: confusion, isolation and ineffectiveness (Bathmaker 2005; Boyd et al, 2010), frustration from a lack of understanding of the organization's functioning (McArthur-Rouse, 2008), disillusionment, failure, loneliness and insecurity (Cole and Knowles, 1993; Hargreaves and Jacka, 1995). Whilst I was extremely fortunate that within my immediate COP I felt valued, acknowledged and in terms of previous knowledge and skills embraced, particularly so by students, it was also useful to understand that the many diverse emotions experienced can be rationalised through an understanding of normal transition processes (Fischer, 2005).

Although the impact of students on identity formation has been of lesser interest to researchers Fielding (2004) explored the transformative potential of student–teacher dialogue, recognizing that in her own experiences students had significant impact. Riley (2009) also highlights the importance of relationships with pupils on teacher identity and also on motivation. This again has been true of my own transition where immediate reflection and feedback on learning and teaching experiences from students have facilitated a flexible and more contingently responsive adjustment of my own behavior's and attributes. In many ways being in the classroom with students has strengthened both health practitioner and teacher identity. Critical discussions and mutual dialogue in the classroom have heightened knowledge in both health and education. Transitioning or co-inhabiting both roles has been integral to my development and a real shift in starting to actually feel like a lecturer within an HEI.

Conclusion

This paper has explored my transition from health practitioner to lecturer in a HEI, using Lave and Wengers (1991) Community of Practice model as a tool for exploration. Equally issues pertinent to structure and agency have been discussed. Engaging in research and

thinking about the generation of new knowledge within another COP now seems possible, adding to my own authenticity and success within the HEI. In reflecting on my own transition and how I have come “to be” a lecturer there is the realization that I need to engage and embrace experiences that are alien and sit outside my own ways of knowing.

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