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Belonging, becoming & being: the role of 'proximal participation' in apprentices' decisions to begin an indenture and its application to preparing young people for work

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In a PhD research project investigating the journey of apprentice bakers, the term 'proximal participation' was coined to describe the entry process of young people with unclear career destinations into the trade of baking.

This paper begins the process of unravelling the significance of proximal participation in the decision making processes of young people who enter a trade via associated occupations. In the research study, all but one of the apprentices who participated in the study began their indenture after working in jobs associated with baking. These jobs could also be generically applied to other hospitality related trades. However, proximal participation provided the research participants with the opportunity to preview a specific trade not as a 'legitimate peripheral participant' as defined by Lave & Wenger (1991) but as participants who were outside the actual trade community of practice. An exploration of proximal participation may therefore contribute to a wide range of vocational and professional occupations whereby proximal participants migrate into 'legitimate peripheral participation' after initial interaction with the trade.

The paper concludes by discussing factors that may be useful in planning programmes which prepare young people for the world of work.

Keywords: proximal participation, apprenticeship, community of practice

Introduction

This paper has its genesis in a PhD research project studying the journey of young people through a baking apprenticeship. In the voyage from novice/newcomer to journeyperson/baker, the themes of belonging to a workplace, becoming a baker and being a baker were used to explain the identity transformation process. One of the interesting aspects of the research study was that almost all of the research participants had unclear career expectations at their initial engagement with the baking trade. However, at the end of their indenture, almost all the research participants evidenced a deep commitment to the trade with many showing continued dedication towards furthering their careers in baking.

This paper explores the entry trajectory and initial experiences of uncommitted people towards engagement into a trade. In particular, the factors that helped to draw people unfamiliar with a trade into an ongoing allegiance to a trade will be proposed.

The research participants

A baker's dozen (thirteen) of apprentices took part in the research study. All the apprentices involved in this research study except for one were below 25 years of age at the time of their first interview conducted at the beginning of their indenture. Ten of the apprentices had left school at year eleven, and had therefore not qualified for further higher level tertiary study.

Entry trajectory of participants

The apprentices interviewed had entered the trade by happenstance. Only one had a preconceived plan to become a baker, all the others had either explored, or actually engaged with another job. All came into baking either via school referred work experience, part-time work in the bakery or through recommendations from friends or family. Part-time work in the bakery included cleaning, helping out with service at functions and shop work.

All the participants fit the profile of entering the trade as 'hopeful reactors'. The term 'hopeful reactors' comes from a New Zealand Council of Educational Research (NZCER) study (Vaughan, Roberts & Gardiner, 2006) which investigated how young people made decisions about their careers. The study was a four year study of school leavers as they progressed into a wide range of post-school careers. The post-school careers of the 114 young people who had left school in 2003 included apprenticeships, the New Zealand army, study at polytechnics, study at university degree or bridging programmes and participation at youth training courses.

Via analysis of the research data, the above study grouped young people into four categories. These were the hopeful reactors (14%), confident explorers (29%), anxious seekers (24%) and passion honers (24%). Hopeful reactors were notably represented by people who had left school with few or no school qualifications. They were usually directed into a career or training pathway by family, friends or school and were concerned about their lack of options, lack of planning on leaving school, the need for financial security and the possibilities of failure.

All but one of the apprentices fitted the profile of 'hopeful reactors' as they had accepted the baking trade due to their lack of direction in finding a preferred career pathway. The phrase that best sums up hopeful reactors is: "I'm not going to end up a bum." (Vaughan, Roberts & Gardiner, 2006)

This phrase was reflected in statements from young bakers such as:

"Yeah, I got into baking through a friend cos my old man, he didn't want me sitting at home. He got me a job in the bakery. And then worked in there for 6 months. And that's how it happened."

"At that time, I was looking at becoming an electrician. I was stretched for hours and had several days work experience, didn't like it much. But the work experience here (the bakery), he gave me two months trial period, and after that I sort of became the apprentice."

"I just heard about it at school, then came out, had an interview, just like that."

Therefore, for these young people, the opportunity to enter an indenture was unplanned and based on advice from family and friends, conformity to social conditioning and the external motivation of waged employment.

The concept of proximal participation

Before the apprentices actually entered into their indentures, the majority of the research participants initial introduction to the bakery trade was via participation in a job that was associated to baking. This initial job was a precursor to their indenture and their status as 'hopeful reactors'.

Research participants worked as cleaners, dish washers, retail assistant and catering assistant for between three months to two years before they began their indenture. These activities allowed them to view the bakery trade not from the 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) perspective but as spectators on the outer perimeter of the baking community of practice.

A community of practice is defined as "groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise" (Wenger & Synder, 2000 p. 139). Therefore, people who are engaged in support roles may be part of a community of practice that is made up of the small business in which they work, but they are not actually part of the community of practice that makes up the craft or trade that the small business is focused on. This is a fine categorisation between embedded or integrated communities of practice. However, when a person is employed in a support role in a bakery (or in other trades) affordances for learning skills or knowledge specific to the trade are minimal.

The term 'proximal participation' is therefore used to define the status of support workers in a trade to describe the types of opportunities available for interaction with a trade. Support workers part of the bakery team. Teamwork is an important attribute in many trades. Members of a work team usually have defined roles and responsibilities which delineate their 'power distance' (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). In particular, the 'power distance' controls the access team members have into the skilled aspects of a trade. These 'power relationships' therefore contribute to the participation levels of non-skilled or support workers in the actual trade.

Participation in communities of practice

Participation within communities of practices is a hallmark of socio-cultural theories of workplace learning. Lave & Wenger (1991) propose that social co-participation leads to situated learning. In particular, they define participation as an activity system in which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and their communities. This leads not only to learning about what are workplace practices but also provides the opportunity to become part of the workplace culture.

The term 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) is used to describe the entry of 'newcomer' into an existing community of practice. Adults bring with them many interrelationship skills that they have learnt through many years of interaction in their lives. Young people who have just left school often lack the life experiences that even a few years in the workplace confer on people (Cornford, 2002; Lehmann, 2005).

Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson and Unwin's (2005) reassessment of learning as peripheral participation in communities of practice indicates the extent that a newcomer is peripheral to a community will vary. Therefore individuals approaching a community of practice will have different skill, knowledge and cultural capital levels to existing members of a community of practice. Young people, because of their immaturity, may therefore have a greater distance to bridge between their newcomer status and their entry into a community of practice as legitimate peripheral participants. The opportunity provided by proximal participation via a related occupation may assist young people in previewing a community of practice from an appropriate position.

The contribution of teamwork

Many small businesses organise their work goals via delegating the work process to work teams. Teamwork is therefore an important aspect of many trades based communities of practice. It has been postulated that the Australian-New Zealand concept of 'mateship' enhances aspects of work based teams (Page, 2002). There is therefore evidence of the importance for young people to become part of a workplace before they become part of a trade. Becoming part of a workplace implies becoming part of a workplace team.

The features that define good communities of practice can be matched to characteristics of good teamwork. The three dimensions that prescribe communities of practice include: joint enterprise being understood and continually negotiated by members; mutual engagement that binds members together as a social entity; and a shared repertoire of communal resources which may include routines, schedules, artefacts, vocabulary which members have developed over time (Wenger, 1998). Qualities of good teamwork include greater cooperation amongst team members; more and easier communication; increased resistance to frustrations; reduced labour turnover; lower absenteeism; and lower tolerance of non-performing team members (Adair, 1987).

However, both the dimensions of communities of practices and the qualities that contribute to good teamwork may work against the entry of new entrants, ideas or changes into the community or team. In belonging to a community, the new comer has to traverse three hurdles. They require a process of transformation and learning in the newcomer as they engage, imagine and align with the new community of practice (Wenger, 1992). However, the onus is not only on the newcomer to adapt, but also the community of practice itself to become more open to accepting new members.

Therefore, the entry of 'outsiders' into a community of practice requires support at the legitimate participation stage from the workplace. Proximal participation as a precursor to legitimate participation provides for a smoother entry into the community of practice by firstly introducing the newcomer to the precepts of a larger community of practice (the bakery workplace) before their entry into the actual baking community of practice.

Belonging to a workplace

Belongingness has been defined as "a deep personal and contextually-mediated experience that evolves in response to which an individual feels (a) secure, accepted, included, valued and respected in a defined group, (b) connected or integral to the group, and (c) that their professional and/or personal values are in harmony with those of the group." (Levet-Jones, Lathlean, Higgins & Mcmillan, 2009).

In the research study, proximal participation provided the opportunity for young people to firstly connect with the workplace and the people working in the business, before engagement in the actual trade of baking. Therefore, the aspects of belongingness described above, relate to the individual associating themselves as part of the team that works in a bakery. Aspects of the workplace which enhanced a feeling of belonging to the workplace included supportive staff, inclusion of the new worker in workplace activities and recognition and appreciation of their role within the workplace.

Identity as a proximal participant

Wenger proposed identity as multifarious (1998). Therefore, an individual possesses many identities based on their ontological, epistemological and socio-cultural backgrounds. These identities also shift over time. Individuals traverse various identity trajectories as they move between cultures, lifespan and between occupation and leisure activities.

The identity of a 'learner' (Boud & Solomon, 2003) and therefore the identity of an apprentice provide privileged learning affordances to novices for learning. Therefore proximal participants will not normally be afforded learning opportunities beyond the scope of their support roles. However, if the proximal participant role is signified by the status of 'work experience placement', 'internship or other similar positions, the affordances for involvement beyond the proximal participant role are enhanced.

How 'proximal participation' contributes to career choice

The opportunity to engage in real work within an authentic work environment provides people with ambivalent attitudes to a trade the opportunity to experience the lifestyle the trade offers. Goodwin and O'Connor (2005) propose that the workplace assists young people in their transition into adulthood. In the workplace, young people learn two important aspects which are important. They learn how to 'do the job' from older workers and they also learn and conform to appropriate standards of adult behaviour expected in a workplace.

Workplace factors that assisted the entry of newcomers into the workplace are listed by Brown (1987, as quoted in Lehmann, 2005). In the study of working class secondary students' aspirations workplace factors was the work being interesting, good workmates and good working conditions. These factors were used by the students as a way to make decisions about the cost-benefit relationships between staying in work and other possible alternatives.

Therefore, proximal participation provided the participants reported in this study the opportunity to view the workplace and the baking trade from an outsider's viewpoint.

Applying the concepts of proximal participation to preparing young people for work

An objective in many pre-trade vocational programmes and indeed most undergraduate applied degrees is to prepare students for the world of work. Participation in one of these programmes is akin to a controlled form of proximal participation in that students are provided with glimpses of the world of work, often encouraged to apply their learning to the workplace context of their field of practice and are sometimes afforded the opportunity to

engage in real world work via organised work placements, internships or workplace based project work.

Guidelines that assist students in establishing a sense of belongingness to a trade, profession or vocation include the need to instil a need to learn and to belong; encouraging team building; establishing scaffolds for learning to take place; providing authentic workplace learning experiences; supporting concepts of cognitive apprenticeships (Collins, Brown & Newman, 1989); meeting the learning needs of novice learners; assisting students to build affinity and interest in the subject; and providing opportunities for learners to learn the tools required to become life long learners.

Conclusion

Proximal participation describes a pathway used by many people to enter into occupations. This paper provides one interpretation based on a small study of how young people with no clear career aspirations found a sense of belonging to a workplace via the process of proximal participation. The process of proximal participation then paved the way into legitimate peripheral participation and a commitment to complete an indenture.

In order for proximal participation to be effective, a supportive workplace, opportunities to belong to and participate as a team member in a workplace and a sustained time span for immersion into the workplace are recommended. In the case of pre-trade or vocational education there is a need to cultivate a sense of belonging so that the novice is provided with skills and attitudes they will be able to continually use to further their careers and to encourage a lifelong learning trajectory.

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