Learner Identities: Undergraduate Interns as Staff Developers – Development of an Identity within The Wider Community

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In the summer of 2006, seven undergraduate interns from six faculties within the University of Glasgow, came together in order to develop resources for staff and students in the area of Enquiry-Based Learning (EBL) (Kahn & O'Rourke, 2005), in accordance with the University of Glasgow's Learning & Teaching Strategy, 2006-10.

The project was carried out in two phases: in Phase 1, the interns were employed full time for a month during the summer vacation to explore the concept of EBL, using the principles of EBL to guide them. This was facilitated by a staff developer from the Learning & Teaching Centre who guided the interns' endeavours to understand EBL. The project included interviewing staff and students on their views, and a visit to the Centre for Excellence in Enquiry-Based Learning (CEEBL) in Manchester. The outcomes for Phase 1 were an EBL guide for staff and students, publicity posters and an accompanying website. In Phase 2 of the project, carried out during semesters 1 & 2, the interns worked part time with a member of staff to develop EBL materials for courses that the interns were either currently or previously participating on as students.

Throughout the duration of the project, the interns were encouraged to present their work at several teaching and learning conferences. They responded enthusiastically to the opportunities given to them, and were responsible for highly professional and maturely executed conference presentations. The interns were warmly welcomed by staff, who treated them as equals and sought their opinions on the development and implementation of EBL.

Throughout the two phases of the project, it was observed that the interns had developed their own sense of identity. During Phase 1, this community consisted of the interns and the facilitator. However, in Phase 2 of the project, this community was somewhat disrupted, as the interns separated to work with their respective member of staff. Through a series of interviews with the interns, a sense of their identity within their community of practice emerged, which resonated with the work of Lave & Wenger (2002), and Blåka & Filstad (2007), and which included reaching legitimacy within the wider community of educational practitioners.

Background

Communities of practice can be found everywhere. Wenger (1999) describes them as being found in all areas of life and argues that communities of practice exist everywhere, as life itself is a process composed of learning and change. In a formal setting, Lave & Wenger (2002) discuss the concept of 'legitimate peripheral participation' in which newcomers to a community learn and develop with the support of a 'master'. When the newcomers have served their apprenticeship, they are seen to

become fully integrated participants within the community, however, their apprenticeship also serves as allowing them to participate and contribute on the periphery of that community. In contrast, Beckett & Hager (2000) contend that much of the learning that occurs within communities happens between peers, and that a successful community of learning depends on the process of learning together and of support within the community. Blåka & Filstad (2007), in taking on the notion that peers within a group form important support networks, explicitly link identity to confidence, and also investigate the importance of acknowledging limitations of knowledge in order to further it. However, these examples are taken from a work-based learning situation, which although gives us clues as to how communities of practice form and function, do not give us the context of the learning community within higher education.

Universities, as places of learning, should foster the development of learning communities. However, as class sizes increase, and pressures, both internal and external, impinge on the time of both students and staff, there may be barriers to the successful formation of these communities. Learning communities may exist between students, between students and staff, and between staff. Successful learning communities should be able to integrate the experience and enthusiasm of all stakeholders, at whatever their level. Gillespie (2001) discusses the blurring of boundaries in academic learning communities with the suggestion that faculty staff and students have a common goal which can be better achieved *together*.

Kuh (2010) lists amongst his 'high impact activities' learning communities, collaborative projects and internships and suggests that students gain from these experiences from first year onwards, in terms of deep learning, and personal and practical gains which have lifelong implications.

It was the aim of the project to give undergraduate students the opportunity to take part in one of these 'high impact' activities; that is the change to take responsibility for the design of some of their own course activities. Using the student interns experience in higher education, and some of their frustration at the methods currently employed at the institution, the aims of the project were to design publicity material that would inform staff and students of ways in which they could become involved in EBL, and also to design some EBL interventions of their own (Pritchard et al, 2008). The interns worked for a month over the summer vacation period in 2007, with the support of an academic mentor, developing material to raise awareness of EBL. The outcomes of the project were an A5 guide, a website, and posters. During the summer, the interns identified a faculty staff contact who would partner them for phase 2, which was the development of the EBL interventions. During the course of the project, it was observed that the interns were developing themselves, and that the project was having an effect on them as they worked together.

Methodology

The seven interns were interviewed separately. Interviews lasted between 30-40 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured, following the chronological order of the project, thus providing a delineation between the phases of the project. Each intern was questioned along similar themes, with areas of interest followed up on an individual basis. The interviews were transcribed and coded to identify emerging

themes. A Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1965, 1967, cited in Charmaz, 2006) was adopted, which allowed for the refinement of research questions during data analysis, and a reiterative process of going back and forth between data and literature to unravel the full picture of the interns' experiences.

Results

Formation of a community of practice

During Phase 1 of the project, the interns quickly formed a community of practice which included themselves and the staff mentor. In the few days prior to the trip to Manchester, the interns' experience was mixed. Some of the group reported a positive start to the project, with no tangible problems. Other individuals, namely, those who identified themselves as dominant characters within the group, found it more difficult in the initial stage due, in part to previous negative experience of working in groups.

"I really enjoyed the first couple of days ... it was good to meet the other students and we had a few group exercises on the first day which went quite well. I think we all got on well as a team."

"I was quite scared, nervous. I think everyone was because it was nice new people to work with and I've not had that good experiences of working in groups earlier so I was scared that people wouldn't be pulling their weight ... but it was the complete opposite and everyone just went for it and had really good ideas from day one, even though you really did feel like you're on your best behaviour the first couple of days."

The defining incident in Phase 1 was the trip to CEEBL in Manchester, which drew the group together. They became more focused on the task ahead, and more sure of what they wanted out of the project, having talked to other interns and staff at CEEBL.

"[Manchester] *really helped as a bonding exercise. I think everybody got a lot closer and it gave us a break away from the first day and it made a lot more sense to get a different perspective."*

"Because we all agreed with what we thought about Manchester it brought us all together because we all had some common ground that we had to talk about."

The interns begin to talk about common goals and a shared experience after the Manchester trip. They also express a rise in confidence at their ability to carry out the EBL task ahead of them.

"We gained a wee bit more confidence that we could actually do it."

The support of the staff mentor was crucial at this point. The interns were able to work on their own, supporting one another, but did encounter times when they were unable to proceed without her support, acknowledging their current limitations (Blåka & Filstad, 2007) and relying on the help of 'the master' to move to the next level.

"[She] *really helped us when we were feeling a bit lost ... we felt like we needed reassurance that what we were doing was right.*"

"*It was good because she'd kind of always recognise when we needed a bit of help.*"

The trip to Manchester is analogous to the retreat that Cox (2004) proposes members of Faculty Learning Communities take part in, as a way to bond as a community. The community of practice formed in Phase 1 of the project remained strong, with the interns successful completion of an EBL Guide for Staff and Students, the website and publicity posters. However, this community of practice was fractured during Phase 2 of the project, when the interns separated, and began work with the staff contact.

"*I think it was a bit daunting at the start just because we're on our own and we're used to working together and we all exchanged emails and texts – 'do you know what you're doing?', and I don't know what I'm doing.*"

However, the staff contact soon becomes part of a new, albeit smaller community of practice.

"*I actually feel that she listens to what I say ... she's very adaptable, flexible, and we've deviated from the initial plan ... to find what the best way would be.*"

"*She's very creative and she's got these kind of crazy ideas ... she was very interested in the project and was really encouraging at the start, and because she was really up for doing something and for hearing what I have to say, which I don't think is normal ... I don't think every lecturer will say ... 'I really want your input.'.*"

Emergence of identity

There is one particular incident that defines the emergence of an identity within the group. Bearing in mind that the interns were undergraduate students in Years 1-3 of their studies, this incident shows the strength of identity within the group.

After exposure to Manchester's extensive EBL resources, the interns made the decision that their EBL reference material should be brief, attractive, and accessible to all audiences (staff and students).

"[Manchester's guide] *was really, really, well, you'd have to be very determined to read it.*"

"[Manchester's] *guide about EBL was very, very hefty and quite boring really, so I think we really wanted to do something that's creative and easy to read.*"

The interns wanted to produce a resource that would be accessible to everyone, but they also wanted to put their stamp on it. This was put to the test when Corporate Communications strongly suggested that the guide should conform to the institutional corporate identity policy.

"We had someone from Corporate Communications come in and basically ask us if we wanted to change the front cover ... I think they deemed it would be more appropriate if we had ... students framed in a park, smiling, with a logo ... but we stuck to our guns and just kept with the original design so I think we were confident that that was the right decision."

So, a group of seven undergraduate students took on a university service, determined that their design should be the published design. It is unlikely that the interns would have thought of doing anything like that prior to working together in the group.

Legitimacy within the community

The formation of the community of practice and emergence of a strong group identity was obvious from the start of the project. However, the interns remained somewhat isolated throughout the process, having contact, in the main, only with staff who were supportive of the group and interested in the success of the project. The real test came when the interns were given the opportunity to participate at conference. Three interns presented the work of the project at a HEA Bioscience Subject Centre event, four interns participated in a workshop discussion at a Universitas 21 conference, and two interns presented their work at the University of Glasgow SoTL Symposium. The reaction of academic staff towards the interns was positive, and the interns were given the opportunity to talk to staff out with the project group, which resulted in a chance to share their experiences of the project.

"I thought it was amazing ... I think it was really nice that we were given a chance seeing as we'd done the work, to actually present it as well."

"I liked the equal responsibility ... It wasn't as if you were just being told what to do, we were treated as an equal and given respect for what [we'd] *worked on and they were asking* [us] *questions on it."*

"I did feel people listened to my opinions just as much as they did anyone else's at the conference."

Not only did staff treat the interns as peers; they also looked to them for advice and their opinions of EBL. This surprised the interns, but they rose to the challenge.

"They looked at me as the expert and they were expecting me to give them all the answers ... [the] *same issues came up that we'd discussed during the summer."*

"I found it really strange at the [conference] *sitting in a group and there were lecturers and staff members and professors asking me questions and it was really surreal, and I was like, I'm not meant to be the one that knows more than you and I think getting over that was a big, big thing."*

Coming out of the project community into the wider academic community forced the interns to reassess their position, and it is during this time of transition into the wider community that the interns express anxiety for the first time, since the initial reservations at the start of the project.

"I'm actually scared about doing the presentation, because I was looking at the lecture theatre and it's a three hundred seat auditorium … I can't talk to three hundred … staff members."

"We were quite nervous at first but … we had a really good audience and they took us seriously … We felt pretty respected."

In making their debut to the wider academic community, the interns, despite the anxiety and doubts, did manage to achieve legitimacy. Without this interaction, the project, although innovative, would have remained an undergraduate student project.

Conclusion

The impact of the EBL project on the interns was immense. These students were given an opportunity to make a contribution to the academic community normally afforded to staff, and were able to use their experience to inform the development of educational materials which would aid their fellow students in years to come. The community that they developed encompassed themselves and the staff that they worked with, forming relationships based on a common goal, to which every participant could make a legitimate contribution (Lave & Wenger, 2002, Beckett & Hager, 2000). However, despite there being evidence that boundaries were blurred (Gillespie, 2001) in the relationships formed during the EBL project, the interns remained conscious of their identity as students, but the identity was that of having a legitimate place within the academic community. It is this sense of belonging and being able to contribute, rather than being a passive recipient, that empowered the interns and gave them increasing confidence. It is vital that we, as the community, discover ways and means of offering more students this experience.

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