Submission title: “Resistance is futile”: the affordances and constraints of power upon learning in a multi-agency community-of-practice

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Submission Type: Refereed paper

Keywords: informal learning; power dynamics; visual methods
“Resistance is futile”: the affordances and constraints of power upon learning in a multi-agency community-of-practice

Paper submitted to the “Knowledge Management and Learning Organisations” conference stream at 15th International Conference on Human Resource Development Research and Practice across Europe, hosted by Edinburgh Napier University, 4-6 June 2014.

Abstract

Purpose: This empirical paper examines the learning of professionals-practitioners within the multi-agency teams of a Children’s Services department. It develops new insights into how learning is afforded and constrained through power dynamics operating within this context. As collaboration increasingly becomes the norm across the sectors, this research typifies the broader challenges facing contemporary organisations across developed economies.

Design/Methodological approach: Aligning with the socio-cultural perspective adopted, the research takes a qualitative and largely inductive methodological approach. Data were generated through photo-elicitation interviews.

Findings: The data provide clear evidence that a new multi-agency community-of-practice had developed. However, within this community there were clear asymmetries in power relations. To some extent these mirrored the traditional professional hierarchies. However, other professional-practitioner groups were also being afforded increased power. This was both constraining and affording their learning, and that of others.

Limitations/implications: The small-scale nature of this inquiry is recognised, as is its reliance upon reports of practice rather than workplace observations. Approaches to extending the research are offered.

Originality/value: The research presents new insights into the realities of collaborative working: how power dynamics impact upon the learning and co-creation of new practice-knowing. The use of visual methods has offered new insights into these professional-practitioners’ lives that might have been left unrevealed through conventional methods.

Practical implications: As we face the challenges of shifting workplace configurations in efforts to confront the complexities of change, there is a need for HRD-practitioners to recognise of how power dynamics within workplaces impact upon the learning of employees involved.

Introduction

Collaboration is becoming a global phenomenon. Across the sectors, contemporary organisations are increasingly recognising the advocated benefits of partnerships and collaborations in helping them to shape their future (Andrews & Entwistle, 2010). However, these new working-practices require a significant shift in ways of working. This needs new learning, and thereby, presents considerable challenges to HRD-practitioners.

This paper contributes empirically to extend understanding of the collaborative, multi-agency teams of a North-West England’s local authority Children’s Services department. Within the public sector, and especially across health and social care, collaborations and partnerships became the keystone of New Labour’s approach to governance within the UK. As a key facet of this collaboration, professional-practitioners from across the breadth of services and voluntary groups working with children and young people are required to work together across the boundaries of their professions and/or expertise, as a single unified
team (see Collett, 2010; Leathard, 2011; Lewis, 2011 for overviews of the policy changes and initiatives). The reconfiguration of these professional-practitioners’ practice was based upon the premise that collaboration was crucial to effectively addressing the multi-faceted issues facing these organisations. This would enhance effectiveness and improve efficiencies beyond that which might be achievable through any single domain of expertise working alone (Evering, 2012). Yet, such workforce reconfiguration has required these professional-practitioners to radically change their ways of working. It has necessitated them to transform what they do, how they think and say, the ways they see themselves and how they relate to others. This has placed an explicit focus upon the need for significant learning and for the co-creation of new professional practice-knowledge (knowing) (Kemmis, 2009).

Whilst the notion of what collaboration actually is varies, etymologically, the term implies a co-equal relationship between all those involved. It emphasises knowledge-sharing, learning-through-practice, and the co-creation of new, common meanings, with an equal worth being placed upon all members’ contributions to this (Leiba, 1996). Yet, this assumption of equity and equality cloaks the pre-existing modes of social organisation between Children’s Services’ professional-practitioner groups, notably the hierarchies of power, status and resources (Ranade & Hudson, 2008). Indeed, previous research has demonstrated how Children’s Services’ professionals-practitioners do not interact equally as they co-create new multi-agency knowledge. Rather, some groups seek to maintain their elite positions of power rather than ceding it to, or sharing it with, others (Fitzgerald & Kay, 2008; Collett, 2010; Currie et al., 2012). In seeking the supremacy of their knowledge-base, this risks both their learning and that of other professional-practitioners. Moreover, the need to invest scarce resources in collaborative projects presents problems for some voluntary/NFP-sector agencies that have insufficient capacity to engage effectively whilst also carrying out their core work (Ranade, 2000). This risks placing these groups in inferior positions in, perhaps even outside of, any collaborative effort and decision-making.

On-going problems and failures within Children’s Services bear witness to such issues [for example, the death of Baby Peter in Haringey (DoE, 2009) and of Khyra Ishaq, in Birmingham (Radford, 2010)]. Examining the informal workplace learning within these multi-agency teams can therefore offer invaluable insights into understanding the way in which these professional-practitioners “construct meaning in their ... shared organisational life” (Marsick, 1987, p.4) and the factors that constrain and support their necessary learning.

Accordingly, this empirical paper specifically aims to examine how power dynamics within the case-study multi-agency teams afford and constrain the learning undertaken by these professional-practitioners, the consequences this has for these individuals concerned and thereby, for the achievement of workplace change. A socio-cultural lens is adopted. This understands that learning arises as a process of meaning-making and identity transformation through participation within a community-of-practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The examination of power is largely neglected in the learning and development literature, and indeed that within Children’s Services is limited in extent. Where this does exist, it has typically examined nuances of power and status within one broad group of professionals, notably the medical profession (for example, Wilson-Kovacs & Hauskeller, 2012). Relationships between the distinct heterogeneous professions have typically been ignored (Nancarrow & Borthwick, 2005). A further contribution of this paper lies in the distinct methodological approach that has been adopted. This has offered extended insights into these professional-practitioners’ lives that might have been left unrevealed though conventional methods.

The research presents clear evidence that these professional-practitioners had developed a set of largely shared values. Therefore, they could be described as operating as a new
community-of-practice. However, within this community, there were clear asymmetries in the power relations. Notably, and corroborating previous work by Currie et al. (2012), the now structurally more peripheral, but traditionally more dominant, professional-practitioner groups were working to maintain their power through asserting their distinctiveness and disconnectedness from the Area Teams. They also defended the need to maintain their established practices. However, contrary to the findings of previous research, as a consequence of a change in central policy, other groups had been able to reposition themselves within the Area Teams. They were now seeking to embed and routinise their own work within the Team as they enhanced their position within the structures.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Firstly, the theoretical frameworks of situated learning theory, and of power, are briefly, yet critically, examined. Secondly, the empirical research is explained. The findings of the research are then discussed. These are largely presented through archetypal vignettes. Fourthly, conclusions are drawn that emphasise the significance of the findings for HRD-policy and practice.

Theoretical framework

In what follows, the two main bodies of literature that have emerged from the findings and that have informed the interpretation of the data are critically examined. It is asserted that these two frameworks can be coherently assimilated to better understand how the power dynamics existing within the day-to-day work interactions between these multi-agency professional-practitioners’ affects their learning to be multi-agency professional-practitioners.

Learning within the workplace has become a common aspect of contemporary organisations. However, whilst learning is largely assumed as a single, mutually understood object, it is in fact a complex and multi-faceted concept (Hager, 2001; Fenwick, 2010). Indeed, in her meta-review of the literature, Fenwick (2008) identified no key themes or established approaches to its study. Consequently, she has concluded that learning is “a series of different objects ... patched together through some manufactured linkages” (Fenwick, 2010, p.79). A review of these differing approaches can be found in, for example, Illeris (2011).

Themes emerging from the data supported by the social-constructivist foundations to the concept of collaboration, indicated that the socio-cultural approaches to learning, specifically Lave and Wenger’s (1991) situated learning theory (SLT), provided significant purchase on the data. SLT emphasises the dynamics of day-to-day interaction and learning between co-workers and with their work context. It explains how learning arises through on-going meaningful engagement and participation, as a process of identity (re)formation, that is, of becoming a different person, within a community-of-practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learning processes develop through the relations between newcomers and old-timers (experts). Through the process of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ so the newcomer progressively assumes ways of knowing and being to become full, knowing, member of the community. Thus, learning is not merely cognitive, but occurs in terms of ‘experiencing’, ‘becoming’, ‘belonging’, and ‘doing’ (Wenger, 1998, p5.). Therefore, in the case of these multi-agency professional-practitioners this learning would be exhibited not only through the new knowledge they had co-created through working together in this new practice-configuration, but more expressively, through the development of a new identity as a multi-agency professional-practitioner.

Significantly, in emphasising participation as its key concept, SLT positions learning as a social co-construction, rather than as an autonomous action. This situated-ness brings the
research focus to the relationships between these multi-agency subjects and the people, tools and artefacts (objects) that comprise their practice. Therefore, emphasis is upon how the quality of these social relationships, and tensions and ambiguity in these, have the potential to afford or constrain participation, socialisation and thereby, learning.

Moreover, the emphasis upon learning as a process of ‘becoming’ brings identity to the fore. Whilst Lave and Wenger do not explicitly address how identity actually develops, SLT intimates that individuals actively construct and enact their individual and collective identities through discourse (Gee, 1996, 1999; Fairclough, 1995b; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). Within this discourse, and the knowledge it constitutes, so issues of power emerge (Foucault, 1980, 1998). However, the dynamic of learning and power are largely neglected in studies of learning (Rigg et al., 2007) and, despite its social, collective perspective to learning, this arguably remains an under-developed and well-critiqued aspect of Lave and Wenger’s work (Fox, 2000; Contu & Wilmott, 2003; Fuller et al., 2005; Fuller, 2007). Indeed, it might be asserted that power and conflict lie incongruently with their positively loaded conception of ‘community’. However, it is such power that creates both social realities and identities (Foucault, 1982; Fairclough 1995a; Miller & Glassner, 1997). Significantly, this power is not concentrated and fixed, possessed only by specific groups of individuals, but is a temporary construction, diffuse, embodied and, enacted through this discourse, becoming a productive social force. Through positioning, that is, how others see particular groups/individuals and how these groups/individuals represent themselves, may privilege their voice over others (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). Therefore, through the practice of their discourse, each group will make efforts to control and regulate the behaviours of others (Foucault, 1998). Accordingly, opportunities for learning might be challenged by the constraints of this social context, through struggles between newcomer para-professionals and agencies to the decision-making ring and the old-timers, and between differing groups and professions (Billett, 2001). This might even act to exclude newcomers from participation in the community, inevitably decreasing their engagement with learning (Illeris, 2004). Therefore, in accordance with Warhurst (2008), this paper considers that the SLT lens with its social and collective perspective, when used alongside the work of Foucault and his contemporaries, provides a useful framework for examining, empirically, the interactive dynamics of power and learning implicit within the case-study multi-agency teams.

The empirical study: methodology, approach, data collection and analysis

As it has been discussed, the aim of this study was to better understand how power affords and/or constrains informal learning within multi-agency teams within Children’s Services. The methodology selected for the research was consistent, as far as possible, with the key principles of socio-cultural theorising, that is, the focus upon individuals and social context. To this end, the purpose of the exploratory inquiry was to gain access to these professional-practitioners’ life worlds, to their experiences of their day-to-day work activities and relations, from their own subjective perspectives. Accordingly, a qualitative and largely inductive methodological approach was adopted.

The case-study (this term is used in this research to define the boundaries of the research site) comprised the multi-agency teams of a local authority’s Children’s Services department in North-West England. The use of one single case reflects the limited empirical and theoretical research that is available in this area (Gummersson, 2008; Yin, 2009). The authority was selected on pragmatic grounds, notably that of access. However, it also offered significant potential beyond others in the region in being amongst the most socio-economically diverse authorities in the North-West. The authority, as a whole, lies within the bottom 20% most deprived districts in England, but it also encompasses some of the
most affluent districts within England (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011; IMD, 2007). The research site was studied over the period February, 2012 to December, 2012. This case-study can be considered to be both ‘revelatory’ and ‘exemplifying’ (Yin, 2009, p.47) and therefore, has broader relevance. The former reflects the exploratory and inductive nature of this research. Its ‘exemplifying’ characteristics reflect the nature of the environment. The case typifies the increasingly unsettled and fluid policy environment characteristic of much of the public (and some private) sector organisations as they face increasing demands for higher service quality against requirements for competitive efficiencies (Colley, 2012).

The main methods of data generation within the qualitative paradigm are observation and/or interviews. Despite a research emphasis upon the social context, issues of confidentiality surrounding children and young people precluded the use of participant observation. Yet, due to the abstract nature of learning and the complexities of these professional-practitioners’ multi-agency practice, the use of interviews alone was considered problematic in gaining cognitive access to their lives. Accordingly, whilst “relatively uncommon” in organisational research (Bryman, 2008), participant-generated photo-elicitation was employed in advance of individual and group interviews (PEI).

Twenty-four volunteer professionals-practitioners were drawn from across the different professional-practitioner groups and agencies comprising the local authority’s multi-agency teams. In advance of the interviews, participants were requested to collect/generate 3-5 photos/images in response to three key questions provided, namely: ‘what does multi-agency working mean to you?’; ‘what does being a multi-agency professional/worker mean to you?’; ‘[how] have you become the multi-agency professional that you are today?’.

To reduce risks of ethical deviance through using photos, the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods Guidelines for Visual Research (Wiles et al., 2008) were followed and participants were provided with a copy of Vince and Warren’s (2012) “responsible photography” guidelines.

The focus of the interview was upon exploring these images/photos. Whilst these provided a means to expressing self-understanding and emotions “beyond words” (Warren, 2002, p.230), they were also used to stimulate the participants’ perceptions and experiences. This enabled rich and extended personal narratives to be elicited within interviews, whilst also ensuring that prominence was given to participants’ meanings rather than the researchers’ preconceptions (Willig, 2008). This approach also gave the participants an opportunity to reflect upon the questions the photos/images raised in advance, rather than requiring the instantaneous verbal response that characterises a one-off interview situation (Walker & Weidel, 1985; Hammersely, 1992). Moreover, where workplace images/photos were provided, so this also presented some contextual illustrations, elements that would otherwise have remained hidden. In the absence of workplace observation, the group interviews offered insights into the interactions between participants. These interactions were recorded in a memo.

The interviews were recorded, enabling the participants’ verbatim accounts to be captured for subsequent detailed analysis of both what was said and how the participants said it. In adherence to the qualitative, interpretative tradition, analysis sought the meaning in the participants’ subjective explanations of the photos/images, and of their experiences encapsulated within the interview texts. Focus was upon both identifying codes emergent within the transcribed interview data, and also from within the images themselves, but with the latter being grounded within the interview data. The staged analysis incorporated a crude form of critical discourse analysis. Firstly, themes were induced from the transcribed interview data and from the photos/images. These comprised both the seen and latent content, the latter including such elements as the emotions, implicit meanings, the
representation of phenomena/events and the layering of the discourse. Secondly, these codes were iteratively refined and organised. Thirdly, relationships and connections between these initial codes enabled axial codes to be established (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These were refined and organised through the course of the analysis and through iteration with established theoretical understandings. This enabled further, theoretically informed, themes to be established (Yin, 2009).

Inspired by Reedy (2009), the findings are largely presented in the form of three archetypal ‘tales’. These vignettes were generated from the participants’ accounts and capture the three dominant perceptions. This is intended to provide a more emotive account of these professional-practitioners’ workplace lives, enabling the reader to better relate to their experiences.

Findings
In what follows, the data generated through this research will be presented. The data evidence the learning that has taken place as these professional-practitioners’ traditional working practices are reconfigured. As Table 1 illustrates, rather than specifically knowing ‘what’, this learning was largely learning ‘who’ and learning a new ‘way of being’. However, the data also demonstrate the complex nature of the relationships between these professional-practitioners within this multi-agency context and how in some instances these afforded opportunities for learning for some, whilst for others, these relationships constrained such learning opportunities. This highlights the significant role of co-workers, and the nature of the relationships between them, in regulating learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Coding density</th>
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<tr>
<td>Learning what (codified knowledge)</td>
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<td>Learning who knows (relationships)</td>
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<td>Learning who to be (identity)</td>
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Table 1: Forms of learning taking place within the multi-agency teams

Note: Star ratings provide an indication of the proportion of responses coded within the category

Significantly, as it will be illustrated within what follows, whilst these professional-practitioners were experiencing not inconsequential frustrations at times, their moral compass served to enhance the connections that they had to one another (their mutual engagement) and their willingness to share their knowledge and understanding. All of the participants cited the “importance” of their working together co-operatively, to ensure that they weren’t giving out “mixed messages, causing a confused child to become more confused”. This was also effectively illustrated through the participants’ images and can seen as a confirmation of their belonging to the same community: a multi-agency community.

Many of the participants emphasised the importance of the formal multi-agency training for offering them the “key to working effectively together”. They explained how “you’ve got to be trained to know what to do”. Yet whilst these professional-practitioners explicitly highlighted how this formal curriculum was key to working effectively in a multi-agency configuration, it was also clear that the more valuable learning was that which was being engendered informally through their day-to-day practice together. This learning can be distinguished as taking two distinct levels/forms. Many of the comments made distinctly related to one participant’s remarks that the most important aspect of being in the Area
Team was “gaining their [other professionals-practitioners’] knowledge and experience from them”. Many of these professionals-practitioners clearly wanted to broaden their expertise, to develop their knowledge-base outside of that in which they had been trained. Therefore, both consciously and unconsciously, there was a distinct affirmation of the importance and centrality of acquiring and retaining knowledge (as a product) in order to be effective as a multi-agency professional.

Yet as well as ‘having’ this codified knowledge, as Table 1 illustrates, these professionals-practitioners emphasised how through working, and thereby sharing knowledge and experience with others with very different professional training and sometimes divergent views of ‘how-to-do’, was offering them a much broader perspective on their own professionalism. For example, one Social Care worker explained how she “had little understanding of what they did, but now I’ve worked with them so I’ve gained that understanding … now I know that together we could do things better than I could on my own”. That the participants recognised the importance of sharing ideas and co-joining their different perspectives in efforts to develop more effective solutions for the child/family, was illustrated effectively in one participant’s image of “the village gossip” and her explanation that “everyone doesn’t know everything”. Therefore, significantly, the participants regularly emphasised the importance of ‘knowing who’, and how developing these relationships was personally invaluable, in offering them support and reassurance through their day-to-day work. This was augmented through the participants’ explicit suggestions that the pre-existing hierarchies had dissolved within these new multi-agency teams. Indeed, one participant was typical of others in reporting that “unlike in the past we’re now on an equal plane”.

Yet, these explicit reports that the multi-agency re-configuration had dissipated the extant power-structures masked clear evidence to the contrary. Discourse within the interviews illustrated both of the existence of changing power dynamics and the implications that these were having for the learning of some of these professional-practitioners concerned. That the power still remained with some professional-practitioners was illustrated through one of the participants’ images. She explained how “I think of us like a clock ... it’s got a mixture of big and little ones [cogs] and they all have an important role to play ...”. However, later within the interview this participant re-interpreted this image to explain how some professionals-practitioners (the larger cogs) were perceived both by themselves and others to have greater importance within the team (the clock movement) than others (the smaller cogs). She illustrated this with reference to a recent situation where “people suggested that the Lead couldn’t be the Youth Worker that it would be the Year Head ... because he’s the one with the qualifications. ... There’s a huge assumption, because the youth worker he’s actually more highly qualified, as experienced, and already within and therefore understanding the situation ... So yes, there’s a hierarchy without a shadow of a doubt”. A further comment that “they don’t see their youth club or an outreach worker that they see on the streets, as an agency ... we’re not a part of them, so why tell us?” (participant emphasis) further illustrates this.

There were also other well-defined examples of how different professional-practitioner groups, and their knowledge, were being positioned hierarchically within the community, thereby sustaining a distinct power arena. To some extent this was typical of the historical organisational power structures. Indeed, the relatively powerful professional-practitioners traditionally, notably the Educational Psychologists, were pursuing significant identity reformation as they sought to maintain their power within the new structure. For example, they explained how they felt it was unnecessary for them to attend team meetings, asserting how “they’re not relevant to us really ... they can tell us afterwards what’s
important”. This was then further substantiated by a later comment of, “in our service it is of course different ... we’re not part of them” (participant emphasis).

Yet, by contrast, there was also clear evidence of a new hierarchy starting to become established. This is captured within ‘Steve’s tale’ (Vignette 1). His ‘tale’ illustrates the how the social processes in play, the elevation of another professional-practitioner group, had meant that felt unable to ‘fit’ into the new multi-agency context. He might therefore, might be considered to have been being precluded ‘legitimate participation’. The account also highlights how perceived power-holders were threatening ‘Steve’s’ identity as an Education Social Worker. Consequently he was seeking to resist change. This was seemingly having significant implications for his relationship with other members of the multi-agency team, and thereby, for his learning.

Vignette 1: ‘Steve’s Tale’

Steve, an Education Social Worker, was very much aware of the position that he felt that he held within the Area Team. He considered that the pre-existing power arena had been preserved despite the multi-agency reconfiguration. He reported how central government was increasingly construing Social Care’s practices as the ruling practices of multi-agency teams so that “the information they have, their knowledge, is of course powerful now”. Consequently, the Education Social Workers perceived themselves to hold a far inferior position with “social care dictating to other professionals and then they say they can’t tell us ‘cos information sharing protocols don’t allow it. Without question, social care’s at the top”. He continued, to explain how, for example, “previously, I could speak with any of them [social workers], but now at the moment, 3000 emails later and they still hadn’t contacted me”. They were feeling isolated and felt that a “‘them’ and ‘us’ situation has developed”. Steve told, through references to, and images of, Star Trek, that “The they are the Borg” (Social Care). “Existence as we know it is over”, they are “assimilating them ... [have] conquered their being, like it’s somebody taking over. Resistance is futile”. This was constraining his learning as he viewed suspiciously and sought to oppose any trajectory that might “turn me into something else”. Moreover, he felt that their efficiency as Education Social Workers was being impaired by the need to adhere to the “imposed social work framework ... another set of processes to go through to get what I want or need”. This need to conform was further exemplified through his image of a filing cabinet which initially presented to illustrate the other professional-practitioners he worked with, later within the interview became a symbol of the accountability mechanisms by which he was now bound. Therefore, Steve was increasingly seeking methods of withdrawing from participation within the Area Team.

Yet despite ‘Steve’s’ reports that Social Care now held an elevated position, conferring them power over other professional-practitioner groups within the Team, the Social Care professional-practitioners themselves felt that they were “wrongly having some influence attributed to us”, maintaining that there was equity amongst all team members. ‘Carl’s tale’ (Vignette 2) encapsulates this view. Yet his account also emphasises the readjustment that Social Care were undergoing as a result of government policy, which was bestowing primacy upon their practices. moreover, this vignette also highlights how others within the social context perceived ‘Steve’, and emphasises their role in enhancing this group’s social status.
Yet it was not only Social Care that had been seemingly empowered by the workplace reconfigurations. ‘Sue’s tale’ (Vignette 3) highlights the re-adjustment she, as a non-core agency professional-practitioner, had made upon securing Area Team membership. It emphasises how other team members had stimulated her ‘becoming’ a multi-agency professional-practitioner, helping her to feel confident and competent in her new working environment and helping her to develop a greater degree of authority within this community.

Vignette 2: ‘Carl’s Tale’

Carl, a Social Care professional-practitioner, was adamant that the hierarchies had largely disappeared from the activity of the multi-agency teams. For example, he commented how that “there’s equity. No matter what role ..., regardless of whether you’re a head teacher, community pediatrician or a family support worker, a HomeStart volunteer, everybody has an equal part, each action is of equal importance”. Yet, and by contrast, he was aware that “there is this belief that social care now has this mystical power ...”. He commented how “this badge is seen as a very powerful thing now, even though we’re trying to let them all know that we’re actually the Area Team, its all the agencies that do it. ... some do seem to see the social care badge as a badge of authority ...”. Carl continued, to assert, “I don’t have this authority, we don’t have all the power. There’re protocols, I have to go to other team members too, we just ask for it”. However, he went on to provide clear evidence of the importance that he attached to the need for developing relationships with the other professional-practitioners to maintain his “mystical power”. Yet that he did recognise the authority that his profession now held within the Area Team as a result of changes in national policy, was evident through his comment that it was they who “asked for it”. Moreover, he explained “....Children’s services in have been driven or been led by Social Care, ‘cos of the safeguarding priority. In terms of multi-agency working this makes a huge difference in terms of what the priorities are, where your resources are put ... so that’s helped us [Social Care]”.

Yet it was not only Social Care that had been seemingly empowered by the workplace reconfigurations. ‘Sue’s tale’ (Vignette 3) highlights the re-adjustment she, as a non-core agency professional-practitioner, had made upon securing Area Team membership. It emphasises how other team members had stimulated her ‘becoming’ a multi-agency professional-practitioner, helping her to feel confident and competent in her new working environment and helping her to develop a greater degree of authority within this community.
Discussion

This paper aimed to present empirical evidence of the dynamics of power and learning within the case-study multi-agency teams and the implications of this for these professional-practitioners concerned. In what follows, the findings generated through the research will be considered in relation to the literatures of learning and power reviewed at the outset. Whilst the small-scale nature of the inquiry is acknowledged, limiting the generalisability of the findings, insights of value to HRD policy-makers and practitioners will be drawn.

As the findings have illustrated, these professional-practitioners demonstrated a strong collective and individual commitment to a shared goal, that of caring for the child (Wenger, 1998). These views corroborate both Anning’s (2005) and Rose’s (2009) work with Children’s Services’ teams which identified such synergies to be an important attribute of effective multi-agency working. That this was the case was corroborated by most of the participants’ acute awareness of the need to engage with other professional-practitioners within the multi-agency teams in a productive way. This was enabling them to develop more effective workplace relationships for both the acquisition of new knowledge from others, but more importantly, for the co-creation of a new multi-agency knowledge and practice to assist them in developing new solutions to the day-to-day challenges that they faced (Wenger, 1998). Through this joint practice, and through these productive relationships, there was evidence that these participants had largely developed new, shared common values and a common sense of trust in one another. This indicates the development of a new multi-agency community-of-practice (Wenger, 1998).

Vignette 3: ‘Sue’s tale’

Sue worked for one of the non-core agencies that was involved in working with children and young people with the local authority. She saw the development of the multi-agency teams as largely positive for her. She explained how being integrated into a multi-agency team had helped her and her colleagues reposition themselves from their previous position of marginality, to a far more central position within service delivery. This had enhanced their feeling of professionalism, augmenting their identity. She further evidenced this through her perception that “at the beginning, well I wouldn’t go into social care ... it was about go out there and find out things yourself. But now they come to me sometimes for help because they know that I might know things that they don’t that will help us all”. Consequently Sue reported how she felt that her agency-group, and thereby her importance as a professional-practitioner, had developed an enhanced external status and external image. This was reframing her professional-practitioner identity. For example, she explained that “they see me as the expert now in these things and that makes me feel good too because they trust me”. Moreover, she indicated that as a result of her heightened trust of others, so she now felt far more confident and felt empowered to challenge others. Through being seen as an “expert” within the team “it gives me the power to question positively other agencies about how what or why they’ve done”. However, she also recognised that she had needed to learn a lot about the other professional-practitioners too, and that is was through this learning which had occurred through her “developing strong relationship with them”, and through her resultant new understanding that she felt she had seen considerable changes in her professional-practitioner life. She had seen the development of a new community of which she “feels a real part”. 

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Aligning with other previous research findings (for example, Pollard et al., 2012), the participants placed considerable emphasis upon the training they had undertaken. They suggested how the factual knowledge they had acquired offered them the necessary ‘know-how’, and thereby, the confidence, to ‘be’ a multi-agency professional-practitioner. However, what was also clear, as corroborated for example by Oliver et al. (2010), was that this formal curriculum alone was insufficient to facilitate the necessary learning required to enable them to perform in the “swampy lowlands of practice” (Schön, 1984, p.3).

‘Sue’ spoke considerably of the importance of participation within the Area Team, of the ‘experiencing’ with others that was enabling them ‘doing’ what they considered to be multi-agency activities, and of a changing identity that was enabling her to ‘belong’ to the Area Team (Wenger, 1998, p5.). ‘Carl’ also illustrates the importance of developing relationships with others, believing that this was vital to ‘doing’ multi-agency work. Corroborating Worrall-Davis and Cottrell’s (2009) findings, this was offering these professional-practitioners a much broader perspective on their own professionalism. This had inherently strengthened them, both as individuals but also as a whole team. It had also heightened many professional-practitioners’ self-confidence and personal credibility, especially those within the peripheral agencies. This had further helped them to participate within the Team. These varied affirmations of taking on the distinct values of authentic multi-agency activities, and of participating in this multi-agency community can be taken as evidence of the emergence (learning) of a new professional identity, a new way of ‘being’ (Hallier & Forbes, 2005, pp.60-61). These findings contrast with Anning et al.’s (2006) work that evidenced feelings of loss of self-esteem and confidence by these groups.

The importance of this participation with, and learning through, others rather than having subject knowledge, can be considered through Edwards’ (2010) ‘relational expertise’. Through this she asserts that ‘expertise’ is not ‘knowing what’, held exclusively by ‘old-timers’ as Lave and Wenger’s theorising would suggest. Rather, what is important is ‘knowing who’, enabling these professional-practitioners to reposition themselves in relation to others. This emphasises the importance of individuals developing advanced relational skills, enabling a far greater understanding of one another to emerge. In turn, this progresses more constructive expectations of one another and thereby encourages the professional-practitioners to disregard what might otherwise hamper effective dialogue and learning (Tsoukas, 2009).

Yet, by contrast, ‘Steve’s tale’ provides clear evidence of a lack of learning as a result of his efforts to avoid being “taken over” by others and therefore, of either withdrawing from participating in the teams as/when he could, or perhaps being precluded from them.

Therefore, these stories emphasise the significance of workplace relationships upon these professional-practitioners’ learning. Where these relationships were positive, so opportunities for learning were afforded. Supporting practices / processes included the development of trust between professional-practitioner groups (as in Sue’s tale). Yet, where these relationships were struggling, for example, as a result of suspicion and or a threatened identity (as in Steve’s tale), so engagement and participation were limited/restricted.

Significantly, and despite some participants’ assertions to the contrary, yet aligned with the findings of other previous research, the data indicates some clear displays of power within this multi-agency community, notably in terms of whose decisions were most influential (see for example, Healey, 2004; Rose, 2009). Discernible within the Educational Psychologists’ discourse, were their efforts to reproduce the extant sources of power that they had held and to protect their resultant position within the hierarchical orders that had endured across these professions for generations. In this endeavour, they were making efforts to regulate the behaviours of others (Foucault, 1998) through, for example, not attending team
meetings and then expecting to be informed retrospectively. Indeed, akin to Currie et al.’s (2012) findings, this group was working to maintain their own professional standing above that of service delivery, and was pursuing significant identity re-formation as they sought to maintain this power. However, and by contrast to previous research which has attributed these enduring hierarchies many of the on-going problems faced within Children’s Services (for example, Hood, 2014), relatively few references were made to these persisting power-structures by other participants.

Yet some did feel that one particular professional-practitioner group now dominated within the multi-agency teams. However, unlike in the past, this power was not perceived to lie with those considered to have the higher levels of academic expertise and academic training (for example, Healey, 2004; Rose, 2009). Highlighting the temporary and embodied nature of power (Foucault, 1982; Fairclough, 1995a), a new contradictory discourse was emerging from the changing political currents. As a result of national policy change in which ‘safeguarding’ was being brought to the fore, so Social Care was experiencing a significantly enhanced social position, taking centre-stage in decision-making (DfE, 2012). Therefore, this professional-practitioner group had managed to gain more influence which was allowing their knowledge and ‘truths’ to now dominate (Foucault, 1991).

Some professional-practitioners felt threatened by this increased power ascribed to Social Care, feeling that they were now being constricted to their ways of working. This was especially evident in ‘Steve’s’ view that he was being “taken over” and that “resistance [to this] is futile”. Consequently, some of these professional-practitioners felt that they had been marginalised as a result of this new situation, excluded from decision-making (participation) (Illeris, 2004). This had implications for how they saw themselves within the team, also their participation and engagement with the processes being advanced within it. Yet the findings also indicate how some professional-practitioners, notably the non-core groups/agencies were assisting Social Care’s repositioning. This was inherently assisting their ‘belonging’ and ‘becoming’ (Billett, 2001; Sebrant, 2008). However, and significantly, these findings also highlight how these professional-practitioners’ learning accomplishments were to a degree, founded upon individuals’ level of engagement, that is, agentic influences as well as the wider social influences.

Conclusions and future work

This study used situated learning theory, to understand how multi-agency professionals learned informally within their new workplaces. This shifted the focus of learning to that of a mode of participation in the social world that results in the changed identity of the learner. The findings from this research have demonstrated how, when used alongside Foucault’s theorising, this framework presents an invaluable tool for understanding the affordances of and constraints to learning within this multi-agency team brought about through the prevailing power dynamics. Whilst SLT recognises power as an important constitutive element of this social world, serving some interests over others, it examines this no further. Foucault’s work has strengthened this, providing a means to recognising both the fluidity of this power and also how, through the practice of their discourse, different professional-practitioner groups have attempted to regulate the behaviours of others, inherently restricting their learning.

A specific strength of this research lies in the fresh insights into the lives of these multi-agency professional-practitioners that have been revealed through the use of PEI. By contrast to the predominant research methods of interviews or questionnaires that provide attenuated and potentially biased accounts of reality, the use of visuals has presented more detailed access to these professional-practitioners’ lives. This has enabled refined and
extended understandings of the factors that enable learning. However, and perhaps more significantly, this method has allowed more controversial aspects to be revealed that might well have remained unexamined without the additional insights provided by the images. These were largely instances of where learning had been constrained. An example of this was presented within the images of Star Trek’s The Borg. Whilst this was further illustrated through the image of a filing cabinet that later was used to emphasise the accountability mechanisms enforced by Social Care colleagues. Through the analysis three archetypal perspectives held by these multi-agency professional-practitioners have been identified, capturing their perceptions of what it meant to be working within these reconfigurations. The use of these ‘tales’ has provided a far more poignant account of the power dynamics evident within these teams, providing a more authentic means of relating to the stories.

The data has provided clear evidence of how these professional-practitioners had largely co-developed a shared understanding and a set of shared values, around what multi-agency practice meant. They could therefore, be described as operating as a community-of-practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Their willingness to participate in multi-agency activity was, as has also been identified by Peckover et al. (2008), influenced by their perceived moral obligations to ‘the child’. Therefore, these participants were largely willing to develop the necessary competencies to enable them to tackle the day-to-day challenges that they faced, and thereby, to develop an effective multi-agency practice.

Indeed, a significant finding of the study was the multiple reports of these participants’ relationship development with their co-professional-practitioners. It was these relationships, notably the development of a relational expertise (Edwards, 2010) that has emerged as the principal influence upon the affordance and constraint of informal learning within these teams. This has seemingly determined the type and quality of learning that developed as a result of day-to-day working. Commonly, across all three vignettes, the participants spoke of the importance of these interactions for enriching their understanding of themselves and of others. This was also influencing these individuals’ identity construction, ultimately expanding and transforming both their ways of ‘doing’ and ‘being’ (Wenger, 1998; Gherardi, 2006). These findings contrast with much previous work that has indicated a distinct lack of trust and relationship-building between these professional-practitioners (Sloper, 2004; Stuart, 2012). However, it can be suggested that this contrast may be attributable to the passing of time, since even for recently published research, data would have been generated around 3-5y ago. Indeed, Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasise the importance of progressive involvement into the practice.

However, despite the significance of this relationship development within this community there was also clear evidence of asymmetries in the power relations. These were having significant implications for the learning that ultimately took place. Yet, power was not always restricting learning. For some of the non-core agencies/groups, their “absorption” into the practice was enhancing their social positioning (Nicolini, 2013, p.5). As a result of this, whilst in the past they might have been precluded from decision-making, they were now contributing to this. Moreover, they reported how in some instances they had been empowered to challenge other professional-practitioners in this decision-making. That this was engendering these participants’ learning was demonstrated through the redefining and reframing of their identity (Sveningsson, & Alvesson, 2003). However, notably, whilst these groups were clearly raising their position in the predominantly task-based interactions, there are few indications of this being replicated within the socio-emotional interactions that would indicate a more comparable relationship (Atwal & Caldwell, 2005).

Yet, complexities in the interaction/participation of these professional-practitioners were, in some instances, precluding learning. This was especially pertinent in the case of those who perceived themselves to be the ‘experts’, and thereby superior to the newcomers to the
Despite the limitations of this research, the contributions that it makes to HRD policy and
practice are now proposed. Specifically the research has offered new insights into the realities of collaborative working: how power dynamics impact upon the learning, and co-creation of new practice-knowledge (knowing). This has implications for HRD-practitioners charged with implementing change within collaborative teams. As training budgets are cut so increased emphasis has been placed upon informal workplace learning. However, this research has highlighted how informal learning is not always afforded in the workplace. Therefore, practitioners must consider methods of enabling and enhancing workplace learning through minimising the barriers to it, with particular recognition being made of the existence, yet fluidity, of power-relations. Additionally, the findings have implications for policy-makers, through accentuating the shortcomings of techno-rational approaches to policy implementation, that assume policy automatically transfer to practice. Finally, the use of visual methods has offered new insights into the realities of these professional-practitioners lives that might otherwise have been unexamined though other more traditional methods. These broadened understandings present directions for supporting professionals-practitioners working within collaborative teams across all organisational sectors.

References


