Communities of practice and international development

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Communities of practice and learning for international development

Abstract

This article examines the concept of 'communities of practice' for promoting joint learning and knowledge production for international development. How and why communities of practice may or may not lead to socially inclusive and innovative outcomes in the context of international development needs further exploration. The article reflects on the conceptualisation of communities of practice in the light of previous research into learning in state-private sector-civil society and North-South partnerships. It argues that the concept of communities of practice can be useful heuristically to understand joint learning and knowledge production if accompanied by other conceptual insights, for example, from critical participation and experiential or action learning. It also suggests that conceptualising communities of practice as action learning spaces captures the often complex social relations and dynamics of learning and knowledge production for development.

Key words: action learning spaces, communities of practice, conversational learning, knowledge, participation

Introduction

Amongst the current foci on international development is the concern with knowledge, and its associated concept, learning. Knowledge and learning are fundamental dimensions of historical processes of innovation and social change. Increasingly, the dynamics of learning and knowledge production are also seen as fundamental dimensions of partnerships, donor-client relations, and how consultants, advisers and other 'experts' are used in development. They also underpin the conceptualization of participation in development.

There are different propositions of how learning and knowledge production occur in social settings. I am concerned with one of them: the assumed role for 'communities of practice' in building capacity through shared learning. Communities of practice are groups of people who

have a common interest and are engaged in a shared enterprise, through which they both have, and further develop, a repertoire of knowledge, skills and practices (Wenger, 1998). The notion of 'community' in communities of practice is metaphorical, not determined by locality or specific form of association. Communities of practice can thus be of many types and forms, within and across organisations and space. In international development, the recent interest in knowledge networks and learning communities, whether face to face and physically bounded or virtual, is based on the idea of communities of practice. An example of a very particular kind is the World Bank's promotion of virtual thematic groups to support learning across staff in the Bank (World Bank, 1999; King and McGrath, 2004), as well as setting up participatory web-sites for Bank clients, and creating guidelines for how to establish such communities. Many communities of practice are simply part of everyday life (forms of community association, work clusters within organisations etc.), while others are established with specific aims and goals. This distinction echoes that of Cornwall (2004, p.76) with respect to 'popular' and 'invited' spaces of participation.

In this article, I adopt a critically constructive perspective towards the concept of communities of practice and the role that they might play in development. At issue is to what extent the concept of communities of practice helps to explain how learning occurs and whether the conscious promotion of communities of practice can become a 'tool' for intentional development (Cowen and Shenton, 1996). Taking a closer look at the processes through which communities of practice are deemed to promote learning can illuminate the dynamics of social learning for development more widely, and thereby add to the participation as well as learning and knowledge production debates. A key argument for the article is that communities of practice are best seen as 'action learning spaces', in which engagement in learning and knowledge production takes place within complex social histories and relations and is thus a contested process. It is however these differences that provide the basis for learning and the potential for thinking about, and taking action on, new approaches to development.

As participation is a key dimension of communities of practice, in the following section, I briefly examine aspects of the critical participation debate relevant to this discussion. I then look more closely at the theory behind communities of practice and what questions are raised with respect to its use for development. In the following sections, I reflect on different dimensions of communities of practice in relation to empirical instances from two earlier research projects. The first project examined the idea that action-learning in development interventions can assist the expression and accommodation of social differences and lead to greater inclusion and coherence (Johnson and Wilson, 2000a). The second investigated North-South practitioner to practitioner municipal partnerships and the process and nature of practitioner to practitioner learning (Johnson and Wilson, 2006a and forthcoming). The final section of the article reflects on communities of practice as a social theory of learning for development.

Social learning and participation

One of the challenges for learning, knowledge and development is how to access and share tacit knowledge. This challenge was articulated by Stiglitz in his speech to launch the Global Development Network: '…tacit knowledge needs to be transmitted by special methods such as apprenticeship, secondments, imitation, study tours, cross-training, twinning relations, and guided learning-by-doing' (1999, p.12). Accessing tacit dimensions of knowledge thus requires additional, and often different, processes to those for accessing codified or explicit dimensions.

Whether and how people learn for development has also been the subject of literature in development management. Past examples include Hulme (1989), who asked why learning often does not take place, and Korten (1980), Rondinelli (1993) and Uphoff (1996) who have analysed how learning has occurred in development interventions and what kinds of conditions and processes are needed to enable it to happen. An important dimension for using and building tacit knowledge is the learning that occurs through participation, interaction and engagement (see Gaventa, 1999). Another dimension is the more explicit process of education

and training for development in which codified knowledge engages with people's tacit knowledge from their life and work experience (examples of such analyses include McCourt and Sola, 1999; Johnson and Thomas, 2004 and forthcoming; Johnson and Wilson, 2006a and forthcoming). Yet, as McCourt and Sola point out, education and training for development does not lead to useful learning if it is not embedded in organisational processes.

Embedding learning in organisational processes or other social settings involves institutionalisation, which, although it can have an instrumental character, optimally requires active engagement and participation. In the development literature, participation assumes that the engagement of groups and 'communities' will lead to better actions and interventions with better development outcomes - and hence better embedding. Behind it is an implied theory of learning and knowledge production, viz. that better learning and knowledge production occur when the power relations that mediate (and hinder) interactions between groups/communities and intervenors are transformed. Chambers, for example, notes that 'for learning, power is a disability' (Chambers, 1997, p.76). Participation is thus also strongly associated with empowerment as an end in itself (Nelson and Wright, 1995).

There is now a large literature on participation and an extensive and critical debate. One of the most common criticisms of Chambers is that his view of the transformation of power relations relies on voluntarism. Chambers is of course promoting the role of local or indigenous knowledge as a basis for informing and reframing development. However all learning and knowledge are subject to power relations and contestation in terms of how they are produced and reproduced. So understanding context, history, relations and purposes within and between groups of actors is crucially important for explaining both the 'popular' and 'invited' social processes distinguished by Cornwall.

The need for an adequate understanding of context and 'the processes that underpin power relations' has been expressed by Guijt and Shah (1999, p.7). Two conceptual aspects raised by them (ibid., pp.13-14) are particularly relevant to this discussion: the depth and scope of participation (so who is involved, how are they involved, and with what outcomes?) and the

inevitability of conflict (including between those constituting the group or within its relevant boundary, and influences from outside the boundary). Both these dimensions are also relevant for the discussion of communities of practice.

The critical participation literature those poses a tension between 'enabling people to play an active role in their own development' (Cornwall, 1999, p.47) and one of the key questions posed by the 'The New Tyranny' critique: 'Do group dynamics lead to participatory decisions that reinforce the interests of the already powerful?' (Cooke and Kothari, 2001, p.8). In the 'Tyranny' critique, Mosse (2001) notes that participatory processes can support 'deep and reinforcing grooves' (p.25) rather than challenging existing forms, and that knowledge outcomes are often 'shaped by pre-existing relationships' (p.32). 'Post-Tyranny' offers some useful ways forward. Firstly, Hickey and Mohan (2004) argue for the need to bring back politics into development and underline the importance of place and space through which different social worlds are connected and through which 'political learning' takes place (ibid., p18). Secondly, in terms of the dynamics of participation, Cornwall (2004) elaborates the concept of space as a social product (ibid., p.80): 'created with one purpose in mind [they] may be used by those who engage in them for something quite different' (ibid., p.81). She also observes that participation thus requires the capability to engage in particular ways. Both these considerations are pertinent to communities of practice. Communities of practice are assumed to be constructed around common purposes - but is this a necessary condition? Does producing shared repertoires of skills and knowledge also require a particular kind of capability to engage?

Communities of practice and development

In this section, I provide a critical exposition of the concept of communities of practice and its relevance to development. To do this, I outline the origins of the concept and its components, and how it has developed over time. It will be seen that the original use of the term as a heuristic to analyse how learning occurs in social settings has also become a 'tool' to promote learning.

The idea of communities of practice was developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) in an account of the nature of apprenticeship. The concept is based on a social theory of learning, viz. learning is situated in social relations and social engagement through which meaning is negotiated. Learning is embedded in practice: 'social practice is the primary, generative phenomenon, and learning is one of its characteristics…learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world' (ibid., pp.34-35).

This idea has two important dimensions with respect to development. The first is that it enables learning to be seen and analysed within its social context. The second dimension is that action to promote certain kinds of practice or changes in practice in development requires us to think about the nature of the learning process involved and how it occurs.

Lave and Wenger use the concept of 'legitimate peripheral participation' to describe the dynamic nature of people's engagement with and learning through practice. This concept is in part derived from their original focus on apprenticeship in which newcomers interact with old timers and then eventually become old timers, or full participants, themselves. However the process has to have a legitimate character - i.e. practitioners and learners have to be accepted as legitimate participants. Legitimacy helps to create the community of participants in practice - or practitioners with a shared interest.

The idea of legitimate peripheral participation resonates with the participation literature as well as its critics, particularly in relation to concerns with social inclusion and exclusion. In Lave and Wenger, contestation and conflict in communities of practice and in the learning process are mainly addressed in relation to the continuity and displacement of community members over time. However the determinants of how peripheral and full participation occur also depend on relations of power and control, including access to, control over and use of resources. A critical issue for development, then, is the need to theorize how communities of practice change and can be changed beyond the generational dynamics outlined by Lave and Wenger.

Communities of practice may seem to be more about social reproduction and social order than about social change and transformation. However, Lave and Wenger challenge the idea of learning as simple internalization (and therefore reproduction): 'In a theory of practice, cognition and communication in, and with, the social world are situated in the historical development of ongoing activity…Participation is always based in situated negotiation and renegotiation of meaning…understanding and experience are in constant interaction' (ibid. pp.51-52). This underlying dynamic thus contests the commonly used notion of best practice that often pervades the discourse of knowledge and learning for development: principles and practices are both socially situated and subject to ongoing negotiation.

The later work of Wenger has tended more towards ways of managing learning and knowledge in education, organization, civil action and international development (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002), as well as providing a heuristic for understanding learning in its social context (Lea, 2005). Wenger (1998) is a detailed theorisation of the concept of communities of practice, while Wenger et al (2002) is an agenda for 'cultivating communities of practice' whether locally or nationally and internationally distributed.

A community of practice is defined in Wenger's 1998 text as a community of people with a mutual engagement in a joint enterprise and with a shared repertoire of resources at their disposal. Mutual engagement is the energy that drives the community - a type of interaction. Mutuality is also embedded in the idea of joint enterprise, which is defined and pursued by participants. Both mutual engagement and joint enterprise are seen to be negotiated, which in turn implies some internal accountability. Thus underlying mutuality is the negotiation and renegotiation of meaning - a community of practice is not a static phenomenon. The third element, shared repertoire, is an emergent property of a community of practice that enables it to continue over time. A shared repertoire includes: 'routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence and which have become part of its practice'

(ibid., p.83). The repertoire applies as much to discourse and ways of being in the community as it does to material objects.

Thus although communities of practice, whether de facto in existence or intentionally created, have the potential to concentrate and direct energies in support of social change, they equally they have the potential to be a conservative force that can adhere to ways of being and modus operandi. The repertoire and discourses of a community of practice can be those that have been negotiated by members, and they can also be those laid down by core participants to which those joining are expected to subscribe. So a key dimension of identifying and analysing communities of practice is to understand the context of their creation, their ways of being and behaviours, and their outcomes.

This discussion leads us to three other key concepts. The first is participation (Wenger, 1998). Participation can be both a negative and a positive force. Potential participants can be rejected (or exclude themselves). Participants can also feel uncomfortable with their participation (or be made to feel so). Analysing the social relations and processes of communities of practice may thus help to identify how histories, structures and agency interact either to promote or to hinder participation.

The second concept is reification. As we have noted, communities of practice have a shared repertoire which is produced through practice and learning from practice. Part of this repertoire will be in what Wenger calls a 'congealed form', in other words, 'producing objects…points of focus around which the creation of meaning becomes organised' (1998, p.58). In international development conceived as an intentional process, examples of reification include the forms and means of designing, negotiating, agreeing, accounting for and evaluating interventions between donors and beneficiaries. Thus reifications become part of the repertoire of a community of practice and have the potential to become institutionalised. Such a process can both promote development and - again - act as a conservative force to rigidify institutions. Wenger himself notes that 'forms can take a life of their own…The use of the term reification stands both as a tribute to the generative power of

the process and as a gentle reminder of its delusory perils' (ibid., p.62). Examples of 'delusory perils' in intentional development may include standardized processes of reporting to donors which exclude deep reflection on development outcomes, or conforming to certain types of conditionality.

The third concept is identity. Identity is at the centre of membership of communities of practice: a way of being in the world (ibid., p.151), which changes over time and informs and is informed by experience, different community memberships and learning trajectories. Wenger treats identity as a multi-faceted concept - identities are several and cross-cutting, as, indeed, are memberships of different communities of practice.

Changing identities and new configurations are key issues in current analyses of globalization, movements and relocations of peoples. Thinking about identity as a form of practice and as a negotiated experience involving different memberships, places and spaces can be a useful point of entry for understanding how communities and practices are sustained, renewed or created in such conditions of mobility. It can also be an entry point for analysing (as well as building) any 'distributed' community of practice - that is, 'any community of practice that cannot rely on face-to-face meetings and interactions as its primary vehicle for connecting members' (Wenger et al., 2000, p.115). The concepts of identity and participation are thus critical elements for grasping the overlapping nature of ways of being in the world and the types of practice in which people engage, leading to what Wenger has called constellations of communities of practice (1998, p.127), some of which might be distributed and local and others of which might be distributed and global.

However overlapping communities and memberships are likely to be imbued with contradiction and contestation, power relations and forms of control. Such relationships are not inherently harmonious or constructive. They may produce meanings and artefacts, but those meanings and artefacts may not necessarily be directed to 'responsible well-being by and for all' (Chambers, 1997, p.11). There is thus a difference between communities of practice as an everyday phenomenon, part of whose function may be to reproduce as well as

to innovate and change the social order, communities of practice that are consciously formed to challenge the social order but not necessarily for the better, and communities of practice consciously formed to bring about social change directed to responsible well-being by and for all (ibid). Thus purpose, as well as dynamic, is a fundamental and defining characteristic of communities of practice and their potential role in development.

A number of critics (see Barton and Tusting, 2005) have asked why the term community is used, even as a metaphor. Gee (2005), for example, argues for using the term 'affinity space' rather than community. The idea of 'space' is increasingly used to try and encapsulate those moments in which action and change (even transformation) are possible (see Cornwall, 2002; Webster and Engberg-Pedersen, 2002). As noted in the Introduction, I propose that 'action learning spaces' may be an appropriate way to analyse how joint learning and knowledge production takes place. This notion combines that of space in the sense above with the dynamic, virtuous circle of experiential learning proposed by Kolb (1984), in which concrete experience and abstract conceptualisation are combined with action and reflection. The idea of space also allows for the multiple cross-cutting interactions, events, histories and experiences that influence learning and knowledge production. They are potentially conflictive, involve negotiation and renegotiation of meaning and act as challenges to accepted practices.

Earlier in this section, I noted that the concept of communities of practice is as much a heuristic device, as a way of organising or promoting learning. It is as a heuristic device that I now examine the experiences of learning amongst groups that did not set themselves up consciously as communities of practice, but were all part of conscious processes of engagement with development. Although I am necessarily selecting a few limited examples for this purpose, analysing micro-level experience can help to interrogate theory and suggest new insights.

Participation and identity

The idea of legitimate peripheral participation may be rather specific to certain kinds of context, such as apprenticeship or other situations where group learning is an explicit purpose, but it may not encapsulate many forms of inclusion and exclusion. In this section, I focus particularly on the role played by participation and identity in mutual engagement. I do this by examining an example of learning in which social difference and power relations were evident, but in which contestation acted both to make difference explicit and to bridge it.

The example stems from research carried out in Zimbabwe at the end of the 1990s into the applicability of a framework for supporting learning through agenda-setting within contexts in which there are multiple, different and differing actors (Johnson and Wilson, 2000a & b). The research included interviewing members of an environmental action group (EAG), which had been set up in the mining town of Bindura, north of Harare, and then in designing and running a workshop. The workshop was to enable members of the EAG to think through the assumptions about their proposed project, address issues of accountability and identify how they would evaluate the project over time. For the researchers, the workshop also offered insights into the internal dynamics of the EAG.

In Wenger's terms, the EAG could be seen as a community of practice constituted by the mutual engagement of members of the local government, civil society organizations and private sector in the shared enterprise of raising awareness and promoting projects on environment and development issues. Its shared repertoire was located in the discourse of the EAG on the challenges faced by the environment in Bindura, constructed and negotiated in regular meetings and workshops. It was in one such workshop that the shared enterprise of the EAG was seen to be a much more complex and differentiated process than had so far been apparent. In this workshop, the EAG learnt a great deal about itself and its multiple agendas, including its lack of awareness about the exclusion of the group that it had assumed was at the centre of its concern: the widows of HIV/AIDS victims who were to be part of, and benefit from, the EAG's first project.

The project was designed to set up an income generating scheme that involved the widows recycling and selling waste materials from the high density suburb in which they lived. Such a project served social as well as environmental purposes, and would support local government in the collection and disposal of solid waste in high density areas. Until the workshop, however, the widows had not been involved in negotiations around the project and their interests had been represented by a local church group. Others invited included officers from local government and relevant ministries, the church group, the mining sector and other local businesses, HIV/AIDS support organizations and from the national environmental NGO that had stimulated the formation of the EAG.

Participants in the workshop discussed the aims and assumptions about the project in four groups. The groups were randomly constituted, with the exception of the widows who were put in one group to help them feel more at ease in this socially diverse situation. However the random selection of participants to groups resulted, by chance, in another group of mainly government officers and other environmental professionals. During the course of the workshop, it became apparent that the widows and government and environmental professionals, in particular, had quite different perspectives about the project.

Firstly there was a difference in standpoint stemming from the social positions of the two sets of participants. For the professional employees, whose challenge was to enhance services with few resources, public education about pollution and waste management was seen as fundamental, as was engaging the local population in providing services that the council was not able to deliver. In other words, the problem and its solution were located in the population of the high density areas. For the widows, the problem was not the production and disposal of waste (waste products were often recycled by poor households), but the production of income. As a result, the widows wanted the council to pass a bye-law to make residents hand over their waste and to give the widows the sole contract for collecting and recycling it. Such a bye-law would also exclude competition by others, if the widows were successful. The

widows also wanted to control the day to day running and income of the project - they did not want to be supervised by another group, such as the church group.

There is much more to this account, its analysis and sequel (ibid). The main point for our present purposes is that, although the EAG was apparently formed around mutual engagement in the shared enterprise of improving the urban environment of Bindura, different standpoints became evident through increasing participation. The shared repertoire available to the EAG was formed by the different types of knowledge associated with particular social histories and experiences, the contexts in which participants lived and worked, and the particular challenges they faced. Particularly important was that the widows went from being excluded to being core participants through their contestation of the assumptions being made by some members of the EAG. The inevitability of conflict in participation noted by Cornwall can thus have both positive and negative outcomes. In this instance, inclusion was gained through challenging the power relations within and outside the group.

The creation of identity through the work of the EAG was also experienced differently. All the members had overlapping identities with other dimensions of their lives: being a Christian, poor, male or female, a parent, professionally trained, etc. Although these identities mediated the different ways that members of the EAG may have shared their 'EAG-ness', it also meant that 'EAG-ness' was not homogeneous. Mutual engagement, shared enterprise and share repertoire are not uncontested - negotiating the differences between them is what gave rise to conversations, debate and learning in the EAG.

Thus a key characteristic of the participating members of the EAG was as much difference as commonality: differences of identity, of life experience, of types of knowledge, of means of expression (languages used, levels of literacy), and of access to resources and livelihoods. It was through these differences that participants were able to learn from each other and create new knowledge (which later informed how the project was to unfold). This process resonates strongly with the idea of 'conversational learning' or 'conversational sense-making' (Baker et al, 2002, p.1). Difference is an essential part of conversational learning: 'it is bumping up

against difference that can stimulate our curiosity, our drive to learn, and our ability to actively try to enter each other's experiences and perspectives' (Wyss-Flamm, 2002, p.150). At issue then is to what extent communities of practice open up or close down such potential.

Boundaries and purpose

> It should be for a purpose. If that purpose ends, you should shake hands and walk your different ways (Senior officer, Kampala City Council, 2003, referring to North-South partnerships).

Conversational learning is theoretically based on experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), and assumes that safe, receptive spaces are needed in which difference can be explored (Baker, 2002). In the EAG case above, such a space was created by a facilitated workshop. Kolb et al use the idea of 'conversational learning spaces' in which boundaries are created by establishing norms that 'determine what can be said and not said, who has voice and who does not have voice…define who is in and out' (2002, p.65). Boundaries can thus both block conversation as well as create a safe space.

Closely associated with boundary is the concept of purpose. We saw above that there were different purposes between the widows and officials with respect to the recycling scheme, and that these different purposes, based on different social histories and identities as well as organizational and institutional concerns, became apparent through the process of inclusion in the conversation. Acknowledging the different purposes in what initially had seemed to be a shared enterprise was fundamental to the enterprise's future. In this sense, shared enterprise or boundary can be more about what it opens up than what it closes down.

The following example is taken from a recent research project into North-South learning in municipal partnerships which are based on a practitioner to practitioner approach (Johnson and Wilson, 2006a and forthcoming). With Gordon Wilson, I have commented elsewhere on the broader aspects of power relations in international partnerships (Johnson and Wilson, 2006a). For the discussion here, a key aspect of the practitioner to practitioner model is that it

espouses horizontal collegiality. The approach is based on peer learning, in this case between officers and politicians in local authorities in Uganda and the UK. The explicit function of these partnerships, which were originally set up in the mid 1990s with the support of European Union funding, was to enhance sustainable service provision in the South. The partnerships were to achieve this by sharing knowledge and promoting learning through visits and working together on externally funded projects. It was assumed that there was professional equivalence between officers, who would jointly identify problems and engage in problem-solving. Although the Ugandan councils were intended to be the main beneficiaries, it was also assumed that the UK local authorities would benefit in the broad realms of global citizenship. In Wenger's terms, these partnerships could be seen as communities of practice with a 'distributed' (or non face to face) element that involved mutual engagement and shared enterprise, and that would develop a shared repertoire by building on participants' professional knowledge and skills. Here I wish to consider how the purposes of shared enterprise were understood, the interests and values that informed them, and how they created spaces for action learning whose boundaries shifted over time.

The most general statement of the purpose of the partnerships was to enable problem identification and problem solving in a number of professional fields in which the councils were both engaged. However, this particular purpose was interpreted differently by different actors: on one hand, there was a concern with material transfers and direct benefits, most often expressed by politicians in the Ugandan councils; on the other, there was an interest on the part of the Ugandan officers to have professional colleagues working alongside them, which, in turn, was favourably compared with the more conventional practice of consultancy. This interest deepened as it became apparent that the partnerships enabled Ugandan officers to lever decisions and resources from their own councils. UK officers shared these purposes, however they also had their own understandings of them. They saw the purposes of the partnerships as teaching and learning, advising, building capacity and confidence through on the job training, and, in one case, enabling Ugandan officers to have control over their own

projects by gaining skills in procurement and project management rather than hiring consultants to do this work.

It was not always easy to sustain the practitioner to practitioner approach over time. Officers in one of the UK councils felt that they were increasingly treated as consultants rather than developing a two-way feedback process, in which they would also be learners. Nevertheless, friendship, collegiality (and in on partnership, other ties, such as god-parenting) between colleagues helped to cement relationships and sustain them. Moreover, for the UK officers, the practitioner to practitioner approach was itself underpinned by the incentive of being able to 'make a difference', especially as it was increasingly difficult to make a difference in the UK. Engineers and environmental health officers, for example, found they had to go back to first principles in their professions when working with few resources in Uganda. This professional interest and challenge was a key driver for them, and for some, was overlaid by values of 'giving something back' in a post-colonial context.

These perceptions and understandings of purposes took place in a shifting organizational and institutional terrain, which had a number of characteristics. First, local authorities comprise elected members as well as salaried officers, and members can therefore be transient and promote different approaches to partnerships. Second, the partnerships were originally promoted by individual champions in each council, in both the UK and Uganda. In one case, it was suggested that some impetus was lost when some of the original personnel moved on. In the other case, a change of personnel in the UK had the opposite effect of encouraging others to take the lead. In turn, they became more confident and learnt soft skills such as negotiating, organising and public speaking to add to their professional repertoire. Third, funding for projects in such partnerships could not come from the UK councils directly, as their revenues from taxation are for core business in their own constituencies. Thus the shared enterprises were dependent on external funding, which was increasingly limited over time by lack of donor engagement in partnerships of this type. Fourth, even with the use of email, the physical distance between partners made communication complicated and infrequent between

visits and slowed down progress of some of the projects. Finally, as noted above, one partnership drifted towards informal consultancy. This change was fuelled in part by the donor's involvement, which promoted a more conventional process of tendering rather than building partnerships on established relationships.

It is thus possible to see that context and boundaries, as well as purposes and the interests and values that informed them, were dynamic and changing. Although they present challenges for continuity, partnerships as bundles of dynamic relations can also create spaces for new activities and new learning. Thus, the ending of one partnership led the Ugandans to consider the possibility of establishing a link with a partner in the South. The ending of the other gave rise to greater civil society engagement between the two towns, through the formation of NGOs to promote visits and placements.

It may thus be appropriate to consider such engagement as taking place in a conversational or action learning space, in which participants and purposes may change over time (as also suggested by Cornwall, 2004). Conceptualising the process in this way allows different lines of inquiry into potential and constraints, or, as Harris and Shelswell (2005, pp.173) put it: 'whether learning in a community of practice can become *expansive*, in the sense that genuinely new ways of thinking and acting are opened up for participants, or whether it is more often *defensive*, in that what is being learned is mostly supporting or reinforcing existing attitudes and strategies' (italics in original). Shared enterprises as sites of contestation over boundaries and purposes have the potential to be a constructively disruptive force. How they are realised in practice depends of the social dynamics and context of the boundaries and purposes, and how they are negotiated over time.

The dynamics of reification

Earlier, it was noted that communities of practice produce reified - or congealed - forms of accepted knowledge that become institutionalised as part of the repertoire. Congealed forms of knowledge can be seen as representing the tension between social order and social change, and between the power of different knowledges. To exemplify this argument, I return to the

North-South practitioner to practitioner partnerships, and examine two reified or congealed forms of practice within the joint activities of the two partnerships. The first is about modelling traffic management, including the role of computer aided design. The second is the use of the survey as an instrument of practice, in this case in designing interventions around water quality and health. In analysing the dynamics of reification, it is useful to examine the interaction of these congealed forms with other types of agency. Both examples show how the use of these tools - which became part of the repertoire - was a learning point underpinned by the social dynamic between the officers, but was also constrained by other actors and the contexts in which they were working.

Modelling traffic management

One of the donor-funded projects focused on developing a traffic management programme for Kampala's congested centre. The project development process included several aspects. One was observation of the traffic problem by walking the streets, a common starting point in a UK context but a new activity for the Ugandan officers. A second was the design of a pilot model to regulate the traffic flow with a computer software package used in the UK. A third was a consultation process with key stakeholders including traffic police, taxi drivers and street traders, at the time an unusual process for all officers. A fourth aspect concerned the conceptualisation of the project process, which was based on learning incrementally about what worked in specific traffic bottlenecks for potential replication in other locations.

Particularly interesting was the place of computer software - a central feature of the practice of designing traffic management in the UK. The Ugandan engineers learned to use the software and, with the UK engineers, they constructed a new traffic management design for a particularly difficult bottleneck area. Yet many assumptions about traffic and street practice in the UK, embedded in traffic management design, are not shared necessarily by citizens in Kampala. Thus, the idea that a junction box painted on the road to keep traffic apart should not immediately be filled by any vehicle able to command the space was not easily transferable and was a learning point for all the engineers.

Although being able to work with computer-based technologies in problem-solving was a useful addition to the repertoire of the Ugandan engineers, using this technology to learn incrementally was undermined by the donor's desire to have a large scale grand plan. The role of the Ugandan engineers in the design also changed when an external consultant was brought in to develop it rather than the engineers developing their own practical skills through a series of small design projects. In this instance, the wider institutional framework was a constraint on reification.

The survey as an instrument of practice

In this case, environmental health officers (EHOs) from the UK and public health officers in Uganda were carrying out a project on water, hygiene and housing. The project involved a Rondinelli (1993)-style learning process approach similar to the idea of an incremental traffic management programme: taking a particular location as a pilot for investigating the main health issues, negotiating a set of actions together with the community and implementing the agreed actions with a view to refining them for potential replication.

Considerable importance was given to the role of the survey as a baseline instrument of investigation. A UK model questionnaire was redesigned by the Ugandan public health inspector. Techniques of administering and tabulating surveys were provided by Ugandan trainers, and the analysis and interpretation of results was carried out jointly with the UK EHOs. The results of the survey then became the basis of discussion with members of the target community (why did they have so few latrines? why were their children not being inoculated?).

The survey as a shared practice between the UK EHOs and the Ugandan public health officers had a positive function in promoting new skills and acting as a basis for community participation. The survey was at the centre of discussions about actions to be taken by households and by the local council to improve water, hygiene and housing conditions. It temporarily promoted further codification of knowledge in terms of generating records of systematically gathered data. Thus while the mutual engagement between the officers drove

the learning process, the use of the survey mediated the process in a particular way. Its usefulness as an instrument for gathering codifiable data as well as focusing engagement with the particular community was a learning point for all the officers. However, other factors intervened to prevent systematic use of this new practice (and how it had been reframed by the officers), most notably the lack of resources for replication in other communities.

Reification of processes and practices thus involves a complex interaction of tools, values, norms, rules and social relations. On one hand, this interaction acts as learning process; on the other, the real world of donor funding, in the case of the first, and lack of funding either externally or locally sourced, in the case of the second, undermined some of the potential that had been gained. There was thus a more subtle interplay of visible and not so visible inequalities and power relations that affected the outcomes.

Conclusions

This article has argued that the concept of communities of practice can help to explain how joint learning that involves tacit and codified knowledge takes place. Mutual engagement, shared enterprise and shared repertoire provide a set of defining characteristics, while participation, identity and reification are determinants of how engagement, enterprise and repertoire interact. The concept of legitimate peripheral participation also suggests how people become members of (or may be excluded from) a community of practice.

This conceptual model has been described by Wenger as a social theory of learning. It provides insights into how tacit as well as codified knowledges are shared and how people learn from each other through shared activity to produce new knowledges. Communities of practice are also being promoted as a means of generating learning and knowledge production for international development (as well as in many other settings).

Using communities of practice to examine the dynamics of learning for development, particularly in context of promoting participation or promoting partnership, can be a useful analytical tool, for example, to compare the 'model' with actors' experiences (and therefore

bring further understandings to the model, or even to create new models). However if communities of practice are appropriated as a tool for promoting learning and knowledge production for development, it is important not to idealise their processes or their products. I have suggested that other insights are needed, for example:

- An understanding of the history of social relations between actors and how they are played out in new social settings will inevitably influence processes and outcomes.

- A recognition that contestation and difference are key dimensions of, and contributors to, learning.

- A recognition that the boundaries within which learning and knowledge production take place are fluid; their shifting nature can affect processes and outcomes.

- An acknowledgement that purposes may not be the same between participants and may also change over time - so an understanding of actors' multiple agendas and the different pressures and influences upon them is necessary.

- That social relations between actors are embedded in the reifications of learning, knowledge and practices that their engagement helps to produce.

I have suggested that thinking about communities of practice as action learning spaces helps to make visible the rather more fluid, sometimes uncomfortable, processes that are involved. The idea of an action learning space views mutual engagement, shared enterprise and shared repertoire as dynamic processes subject to a range of social relations and differences between actors. Such relations and differences which may be representations of power relations and/or they may be opportunities to learn and to change the rules of engagement. While such spaces may be seen as possible sites of struggle, it may also be useful to pursue Nederveen Pieterse's suggestion (2001) of investigating the nature and patterns of transactions and exchanges between actors and how they change over time.

From a normative perspective, underpinning the idea of a 'safe' action learning space involves trust and agreed rules. Such a process requires conscious and reflexive action

embedded in an awareness of the politics of development and a preparedness to 'learn with' (Wilson, forthcoming). However, social learning is not necessarily a safe process and reflects wider social relations (as Wilson would be the first to acknowledge; see also Kelly, 2004). It also involves risk and constantly negotiating and renegotiating meaning.

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