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Developing a Program Community of Practice for Leadership Development

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Developing a Program Community of Practice for Leadership Development

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ABSTRACT

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This article outlines how a community of practice can be designed within management education for effective leadership development. Through a qualitative study of a cohort of 25 owner-managers of small businesses, we explore how a program community of practice (PCoP) acts as a pedagogical device for focusing on the development of leadership practice. Drawn from ‘grounded theory’ analysis, we outline a pedagogic heuristic of a PCoP built upon an emergent rather than a didactic curriculum, shaped by the PCoP members’ own experiences and practices of managing their businesses. Our contribution is to illustrate the significant value of applying communities of practice theory to pedagogic designs in order to advance the development of leadership practice in small businesses. We critically examine this contribution with regard to the scope that designing a PCoP can bring to leadership development and the challenges for educators designing and facilitating an emergent curriculum.

Key Words: community of practice; leadership development; leadership practice; emergent curriculum; SMEs

Introduction

The opportunity for designing learning communities into leadership development has been suggested as a most relevant mechanism for changing management practices and identities beyond the classroom (Howorth, Smith & Parkinson, 2012). Leadership development from this perspective involves using social / relational systems (Day, 2000) linked with peer learning to enable leadership development. Related research has shown that leadership

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learning draws predominately from social learning (Bennis and Thomas, 2002; McCall 2004; Janson, 2008; Kempster & Stewart, 2010). Sorenson and Milbrandt (2015) and Howarth et al. (2012) have suggested that the notion of a community of practice (CoP) has strong applicability to the field of learning and education. However, designing for and cultivating learning communities explicitly centered on social learning as a central feature of a leadership development program has not been examined in depth.

In the classroom context with primary and secondary (K-12) students, greater attention has been given to the notion of community of learners (*see*, for example, the work of Bielaczyc, Kapur & Collins, 2013). Of the few studies, in the context of management development, Monaghan (2011) explores learning strategies using learning communities in a classroom setting. However, Monaghan does not create an explicit link to connecting practices from business contexts into the context of a learning community within a management development program. Our endeavor in this article is to understand learning within an organized leadership development program that is overtly connected to business contexts through the participative role of owner-managers. When we speak of owner-managers in this article we refer to someone who owns and controls the business and is also the key person in managing the business. The program seeks to develop inter-learner participation as a form of learning community. We are interested in understanding the dynamics of the flow of learning between the program and the businesses (and, indeed, other areas of their lives). Drawing from these interests our research has two interrelated questions: How does the learning occur? Where does the learning take place?

In this article, leadership learning / development refers to the processes of developing managers with respect to leadership through management education. We first position

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leadership learning and interrelated leadership practice as being a phenomenon that is predominantly a consequence of situated and relational experiences. As such, there is a need for leadership development within management education to give emphasis to relational dynamics. We explore how building learning communities can provide such a dynamic for the development of leadership practice. Secondly, we outline the research setting. This is based on a non-accredited leadership-development program in the UK in which over 3000 owner-managers have participated (Barnes, Kempster & Smith, 2015). Through the application of grounded theory, the study is distilled into a pedagogical heuristic drawn from five core selected themes. These themes illustrate how learning occurs between the program and the owner-manager businesses. The social process of the grounded theory that draws from these five themes is offered as a program community of practice (PCoP). Thirdly, and drawing on the data, we examine each theme to illuminate the systemic flow of these elements within the heuristic. In this way we answer the two research questions of how and where the learning occurs. Fourthly, we discuss the opportunities and challenges for both participants and educators of working with a PCoP. We give particular attention to engaging and enabling an emergent curriculum through a social-learning pedagogy.

Reframing leadership development through the notion of communities of practice

There is plentiful empirical evidence and connected theoretical explanations that strongly point to social learning in the milieu of life as forming instruction and symbolic guidance to leadership learning (for useful reviews, *see* McCall, 2004; Janson 2008; and in the context of owner-manager leadership learning, *see* Kempster & Cope, 2010). We suggest a central

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challenge to pedagogic designs within leadership development is how to enable social learning that connects to workplace identities.

We believe that Reynolds’ argument for the development of a ‘learning community’ (2000:77) in management education is highly significant to the endeavor of stimulating social learning. Reynolds focuses on a participative pedagogy, with joint responsibility of tutors and learners in the design, content and direction of the program. A learning community can be seen as a form of temporary learning organization; a way of thinking about the dynamics of shared meaning, common or aligned purposes, co-constructed practices and identities, and the characteristics espoused of a learning organization, albeit temporary (Vince, 2018). Connected to notions of a (temporary) learning organization or a learning community is the well-developed theory of CoPs (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998). CoP theory explores how people learn through socially situated activities and how this contributes to knowledge acquisition in social settings (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The theory has become increasingly influential within various domains of management (Roberts, 2006). An area where it has not been used to any great extent is the application of CoP in management education programs, and even less in the area of leadership development. Taking this a step further, there is a dearth of attention to using CoPs within leadership programs for entrepreneurs. Social approaches to learning are known to have relevance to small businesses, owner-manager leadership development and business growth (Gibb, 2009; Jones, Sambrook, Henley & Norbury, 2012).

Research has been undertaken in the age 6-18 (K-12) student group, focused on cultivating communities of learning (Bielaczyc et al., 2013; *see also* Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999). In this context, a learning community is suggested to have the purpose of advancing

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collective knowledge that also supports individual learning (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999; Bielaczyc and Collins, 2006; Collins & Greeno, 2010). The focus on community learning gives a priority for educationalists to pursue a ‘process of enculturation with a focus on learning *to be* rather than simply *learning about*’ (2013:3, emphasis in original). As such, the approach draws deeply on the epistemic foundations of situated learning and CoPs, on which we shall elaborate shortly. Bielaczyc et al. (2013) offer a model for cultivating a community of learning (that draws from Bielaczyc and Collins, 2006) as a mutually reinforcing system. Such a system links a set of pedagogic assumptions of connecting the classroom with the outside world, through the use of appropriate technology (2013:13). A limitation of the work of Bielaczyc et al. (2013) is to the context of K-12 students. Our focus here is on owner-managers of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and the leadership challenges they face; thus, a very different classroom dynamic of expectations, power, extended relationships, and interests to that of young students. However, the crossover of principles is important, most notably the emphasis on relational knowing through participation (Collins & Greeno, 2010). We therefore draw later on these ideas.

Membership of a CoP is argued to impact on other areas of members’ lives. McDermott (1999) described this as a double-knit process, whereby experiences are brought to the CoP for investigation and integration into the community’s practice generating solutions applied in the workplace. Utilizing CoPs in a program for leadership development should, arguably, enable the double-knit process through an indefinite learning loop. The knowledge creation and practice of leadership development within a PCoP – such as a learning intervention – impacts on the practices elsewhere. The learning loop is therefore a relational, interconnected and multi-directional process.

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Social-learning theories, such as CoP theory, assume an on-going ‘process of knowledge production which is indissociable from the situated, contextual, social engagement with the material lived-in-world’ (Fox, 1997:731). Emphasis is placed on practice, embedded meaning and understanding, which emerge and develop between people in communities focused on context-specific activity. CoP theory is centered on social participation in which collective situated practices emerge from the pursuit of specific endeavors that are the property of a community created over time (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). We shall not restate the theory of CoP (useful reviews can be found in Cox, 2005; Roberts, 2006; Murillo, 2011 and the seminal CoP texts: Lave & Wenger, 1991 and Wenger, 1998), but stress the focus on social processes within ongoing relational practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Chaiklin and Lave, 1996). Pattinson, Preece & Dawson (2016) have helpfully summarized extant literature suggesting CoPs can be considered as enablers of inter-organizational learning. Although their work is not overtly connected with management education, the focus is on the impact of CoPs on inter- and intra-organizational knowledge transfer. These authors offer strong support for CoPs as a useful mechanism whereby learning in one domain impacts on another: ‘learning is a process that involves becoming part of a community in which effective learning involves participation and collaboration across boundaries’ (Pattinson et al., 2016: 517). The inter-organizational boundaries we shall explore in this article are between various SME contexts, in which the participant owner-managers are central to the educational program.

CoPs can be cultivated in organizational contexts (Wenger et al., 2002), and the K-12 student research on learning communities suggest this cultivation can also occur in educational contexts. Alongside cultivation of CoPs, Pattinson et al. (2016) give strong

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support to Meyer & Marion's (2010) argument that CoPs can be managed actively. Such active management to enable the pursuance of specific goals and the benefits of participation in terms of social capital (Swart & Kinnie, 2007) across these organizational boundaries (2016:12). Drawn together, there is strong supportive theorizing that CoPs as learning communities can be cultivated to enable the learning within them to impact elsewhere (and vice versa). How this can be undertaken in the context of leadership development has not been overtly undertaken within extant literature.

Methodology*Empirical setting*

Between 2004 and 2016 a leadership development program, funded by UK government initiatives in England and Wales was undertaken by over 3000 owner-managers. The program was delivered through a consortium of management education providers. The main objective of the program was to stimulate business growth. This growth to occur through the leadership development of owner-managers in a way that was informed by the practices of running SMEs and applied back to the owner-managers' organizational context.

To build a peer-learning community, a cohort structure was pursued. Approximately 25 owner-managers participated in the program for a duration of (typically) ten months and undertook the following learning activities contained in Table 1 below:

Insert Table 1 about here

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Running throughout the program was a focus on reflection, peer learning, group work and opportunities to practice learning in the organizational context (for a more detailed overview of the program see (Barnes et al., 2015). All of these elements are highlighted by Waller, Bovill & Pitt (2011) to link heightened connectivity of learning to organizational practices. The program was not accredited and accordingly did not have formal assessments. The businesses were a constant source of investigation, with real-life issues, challenges and opportunities being brought into the classroom as a central point of inquiry shaping the curriculum.

Data collection

The purpose of the research was to examine the leadership program with the aim of seeking to understand where and how learning occurred on the program. An in-depth qualitative study was carried out to enable us to gain insights into the learning processes. To get such depth, we focused on a single cohort of owner-managers for the complete duration of the program – a total of ten months. There were 25 participants, and their profiles are highlighted in Table 2 below, which illustrates the heterogeneity of the owner-managers and their businesses.

Insert Table 2 about here

During the program-recruitment process and before the program began, all owner-managers were invited to participate in this research. All 25 wanted to participate and permission was gained in writing from them all. Throughout the research process, the participants were advised on the broad focus of the research as seeking to understand their experiences of the program and their leadership development.

Data collection included participant observation of the learning interventions (masterclasses, site visits, action-learning sets, the online forum, overnight experiential workshop and learning and reflection days). After each observation, notes were typed up into more comprehensive sentences and accounts of what had been observed, in order to present what Geertz (1973) terms ‘thick description’. This was done as soon as possible, to keep the accounts as fresh as possible. The observational notes totaled over 300 pages of typed notes. Additionally, semi-structured qualitative interviews with all 25 owner-managers were carried out in the workplace towards the end of the program (months 8-10). The line of enquiry focused on how and where they thought they were learning on the program. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes (over 10,000 hours in total) and all were recorded and transcribed, resulting in (approximately) a further 600 pages of typed notes. Additional data included the conversations on the online forum, emails from the participants and our continuous reflections and conversations as both program facilitators and researchers.

Reflexivity

Sue was both the program director, facilitating many of the learning interventions, and researcher; Steve and Etienne facilitated some of the learning interventions and were researchers involved in the analysis and sense-making of the data. Sue strived to be reflexive in the research process (Cunliffe, 2004). During each observation Sue frequently made notes alluding to how she was feeling about the context and the self-awareness (Mason, 2002) she encountered by being present during the different types of observations. Sue brought these together in a reflective diary. She frequently talked through the reflections with Steve and Etienne in order to become reflexive on the observations and ‘conceptual baggage’ carried that can distort interpretations of what has been observed (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). With the

dual identity of program director and researcher, Sue engaged embraced ‘epistemic reflexivity’ (Johnson & Duberley, 2000) – thinking about her meta-theoretical assumptions of interpreting what she observed. In this way, the ‘researcher-self’ (Coffey, 2002) became a source of reflection and re-examination as an integral component in the research process (Krenske, 2002). The role of Steve and Etienne was to catalyze such reflexivity on the assumptions being drawn – especially with regard to the emerging grounded theory from the data analysis.

Data analysis

The analysis drew upon grounded theory because we wanted to understand the phenomenon of learning from the standpoint of those who lived it (Charmaz, 2000). We also wanted to be able to describe what was happening in the program and develop a theory ‘grounded’ in the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Parry, 1998).

Table 3 further on will provide an example of the coding procedure undertaken. It is a slice of the grounded-theory analysis. It illustrates how a single selective code is formed from five axial codes, with the axial codes being drawn from a range of open codes. Space does not permit us to illustrate the whole process that resulted in the following five selective codes: desiring a learning community that is supportive and shares common objectives; facilitators enabling a range of learning moments; learning through becoming a member of the learning community; using participants’ experiences as owner-managers to shape the community learning; learning through participation and conversation.

There were seven stages to our data analysis, reflected in Table 3 below:

Insert Table 3 about here

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Stage #1: We sought to become familiar and ‘intimate’ with our data (Senior, Smith, Michie & Marteau, 2002) to get a rich sense of the participants’ experience.

Stage #2: We openly coded all the typed-up and transcribed data, assigning conceptual labels (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Stage #3: We employed a constant comparison method, broadly using steps set out by Glaser & Strauss (1967) (cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985:339) (comparing incidents applicable to each category and integrating categories and their properties) to form open codes.

Stage #4: Using King’s (1998) template analysis, axial codes emerged, this also identified codes that had limited or no regularity. We explored how the axial codes connected to the open codes and broad sections of the raw data.

Stage #5: Five selective codes were formed from the axial codes; these captured the meanings and processes from the axial codes.

Stage #6: Looking across the selective codes, we established the social process (as the grounded theory) that encapsulated the selective codes. The social process became a PCoP as a learning community.

Stage #7: From reading the literature on CoP theory and discussions between us, the social process was elaborated to become a heuristic for understanding what was occurring in the leadership development program. We tested this emerging heuristic with four other providers and a selection of participants from the cohort. This led to some minor changes.

Our grounded theory for the emergence of a PCoP illustrated in Figure 1 below:

Insert Figure 1 about here

All five elements within the heuristic are grounded in the owner-managers’ experiences from their own sites of practice. Our data shows that it is the assemblage of these experiences, alongside the needs of the owner-managers to desire a learning community, which enables the PCoP to become manifest. To give emphasis to such emergence we employed connecting double-headed arrows. So, rather than viewing the elements as steps, we saw them as essential aspects of an integrative learning process connected to the respective owner-manager’s context. We move on now to outline the detail of the heuristic.

A Program Community of Practice

The PCoP is theorized as a way of thinking about the leadership development program under investigation. The PCoP was formed through the owner-managers’ joint enterprise and mutual engagement of leadership development, which is the connection of the PCoP with the SME businesses led by the owner-managers. As the PCoP developed through the community focusing on advancing leadership development, so the owner-managers developed their leadership practice within the SME. At the same time the owner-managers developed a shared repertoire on leadership practice that helped to strengthen participation, activities, meanings and practices of the PCoP. We next explore each of the five elements identified in Figure 1.

Element #1: Building the program joint enterprise and mutual engagement

The program’s joint enterprise was to make leadership highly salient, in order to stimulate owner-manager leadership development (Cope, Kempster & Parry, 2011). This occurred through an engagement in a multiplicity of social-learning stimuli that drew on the owner-

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managers' context and everyday challenges. Members understood this, contributed to it and were accountable for it. The collective commitment to this joint enterprise, required of participants and facilitators alike, was a central feature of the design, cultivated from the outset during the recruitment process. The owner-managers were made aware they would draw upon their own life experiences of running SMEs during the various learning interventions. They were also informed that there would be a strong emphasis on meaning and understanding generated through an intra-cohort dialogue; such a dialogue would be in contrast to a didactic pedagogy driven by ourselves, as teachers, with predetermined aspects of decontextualized knowledge to be transmitted.

Taken from observational notes of a facilitated experiential project in the overnight experiential workshop, Matthew commented to the cohort:

I hadn't realized the impact leadership can have. The thing we just did showed an absolute lack of leadership. The leaders were actually trying to do the job but the workers just thought they were interfering [so didn't assist]. I know this happens in my business. This has really made me think about the importance of leadership, good and bad, intentional and unintentional.

The emphasis Matthew gave here was to connect the salience of leadership to his business; but he also made the point that this was the cohort's shared issue by emphasizing 'the thing we just did'. Three months into the program, Mary commented on the online forum: *I am starting to think about situations with a much more 'step back' approach and finding the issues are far easier to deal with. Does anybody else think this is what being a leader is?* Mary was connecting the program purpose with the joint enterprise and mutual engagement of leadership development that was becoming salient in her everyday business activities. She

reached out to all, seeking reinforcement to the shared agenda. Alan responded: *I'm coming to the realization that if we do nothing we are still leaders. Our teams expect it from us.* He was connecting increased salience of leadership with the joint enterprise. In an interview with Jenny, half-way through the program, she commented that *there is a link because everybody on [name of program] wants to be a good leader so there is a commonality there that sort of links you.* Jenny not only underlines the joint enterprise, but, along with Alan and Mary, speaks of the desire to have a broader sense of shared aspirational identity associated with a sense of 'becoming' in the cohort as well as in their businesses. The joint enterprise and mutual engagement were integral aspects of the PCoP and became cultivated through social interaction to which facilitation was most significant.

Element #2: Enablers of social learning

For the development of a PCoP, the notion of enablers is central. Smith (2012) uses the term to refer to the facilitators who create the environment for learning. We use the term 'enabler' as one who helps the owner-managers to become full members of the PCoP through keeping the joint enterprise prominent and reinforced at numerous interactions and conversations through the mutual engagement and development of a shared repertoire. The enablers on this program included the program director, masterclass presenters, coaches, and action-learning-set facilitators. All were engaged in creating the environment for social learning by stimulating and encouraging the circulation of knowledge drawn largely from the PCoP members' own experiences of their businesses.

An important role for the enablers was the recognition that trust needed to develop in the PCoP (similar to enablers of knowledge-management processes, Hildreth & Kimble, 2004). Over time, trust became an integral part of the PCoP, providing psychological safety

(Howorth et al., 2012) that facilitated and enabled learning. It is perhaps axiomatic to assert, but when members of the PCoP trusted each other, individuals felt more comfortable in openly exchanging their thoughts, experiences, ideas, uncertainties or lack of understanding. This engendered a willingness to support and promote innovative ideas in the PCoP. Most typical within cohort conversations were reflections of experimenting with ideas in their businesses that had been developed in the program. The role of the enablers was to be deeply watchful in order to both nurture learning exchanges between members of the cohort and to steward the emergence of the PCoP. The enablers guided emergent conversations within organized processes, such as the action-learning sets. Observational notes of an action-learning set showed the crucial role of the facilitator in the process of enabling peer learning:

The set have been wanting to offer suggestions to Frances, they just want to help her. I can sense their frustration at having to tackle this through open questions. [Facilitator] has been guiding them. He says, 'Frances's issue is hers and it is unique to her.' He is central to the set in a quiet way. I think without him they would just be telling each other what to do.

The group's frustration at having to pursue the issue through a process of questions rather than opinions speaks to the challenge as to how they would normally interact within their businesses. Holding to this process was eventually valued. Captured in an interview with Brendan he commented that, 'I can see why you avoid being too prescriptive ... one size does not fit all and I think you know that.'

This speaks to the participative pedagogy – encouraging the participants to learn from each other, relying less on the tutors as the 'sage on the stage' but as the 'guide on the side'

(Jones & Steeples, 2002:9). It also speaks to enabling the learners to grasp the connection of the issues from the perspective of their respective businesses.

Element #3: Co-constructing understanding through participation, dialogue and negotiated meanings

The program relied on the dialogical creation of meaning and construction of knowledge through interactive peer-to-peer learning. It was through talking to one another (and to an extent with the enablers) that the PCoP members developed an understanding of their own leadership practices through the continual application of learning to their businesses. There were subsequent conversations on such application back in the PCoP to reinforce the mutual enterprise and strengthening of the PCoP. During an observation of a facilitated reflection session from the business-shadowing exercise Sue noted:

Solomon and Rickin have just completed a process of shadowing each other and are in a session speaking about the experience. Solomon gives feedback from what he learned: ‘[Rickin’s] energy rubs off on you. He’s coaching his own staff and getting training in that helps them to be better. I’ve stolen that from him, I want to do that in my business. Enabling the staff to have the answers enables you. I have learnt a lot from him.’

The curriculum of the program was centered on each delegate’s own experiences and challenges, which were brought to the learning interventions for on-going scrutiny and reflection on proposed action and reflection of action. This provided for learning that was most applicable to the business contexts. At the same time, the delegates’ work practices influenced and shaped the practices, identities and meanings forged within the PCoP through the continual dialogue regarding the challenges being addressed in each other’s businesses. In

an interview with Brendan, he commented: ‘I learn through the others’; describing how this occurred: ‘informally during coffee, sitting next to people ... A group of us have even started to arrive early so that we can talk to each other before the masterclass starts.’ On the online forum, towards the end of the program, Gloria commented: ‘I am learning a lot from everyone. Your businesses fascinate me and I feel lucky to have such a group of people to talk to who understand my business.’ The comment is more than a thank you, it is speaking of a process of knowledge co-construction with each other and the enablers, through participation, experimentation and, crucially, dialogue.

The focus on leadership and the challenges in their businesses contributed to the continual development and maintenance of the PCoP. The on-going negotiation of meaning of membership, by fusing together ‘business’ language and experiences into being a member of a PCoP was about the joint enterprise of leadership salience and learning to lead. The owner-managers’ own situated viewpoints had collective relevance despite the heterogeneity of the businesses. The participative learning journey developed a set of meanings and understandings centered on the owner-manager responsibilities of running small businesses. Such meanings and understandings became a core part of the community’s viewpoint and language, through which practices emerged.

Element #4: Processes of becoming shaping practice and identity as a PCoP member and as a business leader

When we speak of ‘becoming’ in this article, we draw on social constructionist notions of a relational sense of self in terms of being, knowing and doing, informed through participation (Shotter, 1993). Rather than placing emphasis on the essentialist qualities of an individual, in this context ‘becoming’ is inextricably connected and aligned with others (Chia & MacKay,

2007). It is a malleable and relational construction. For example, the knowing, doing and being associated with becoming a member of the PCoP was informed by historic practices, and constructed through what others did, said and responded to; it was an on-going dynamic of becoming, rather than a static sense of being (Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006). Through participation, the owner-managers negotiated what it meant to be a member of the PCoP, acquiring and developing a language and an identity that was recognized by the community. During an interview with Rickin he captured the becoming within the PCoP as becoming a student:

To be honest I was wary of coming to a university, I don't have a degree or anything and I was wary of what the group would be like ... I have come to think of myself as a student. My daughter laughs at me when I say I am off to the university to be a student.

The PCoP became a mechanism of social learning for this leader 'becoming' through pursuance of the joint enterprise of leadership salience. Wenger (1998) argues that learning is not just acquiring skills and information; it is becoming a certain person, a knower in a context where what it means to know is negotiated with respect to the regime of competence of a community. With regard to a negotiated sense of becoming, the following note, taken from observing a business-shadowing reflection session, illustrates a negotiated sense of becoming:

Ted is presenting on his exchange with Frances: 'Talking to my staff is a big part of my job. The importance of the leader being seen to know where they're going.' Frances comments that Ted expressed at the start of the shadowing that he 'didn't feel like the leader, but that from talking to his staff, they say he is the leader of the business and this is what they want him to do.' Later in the discussion, Ted says that he 'now has the confidence to make changes in his company because I'm part of this group.'

Ted's sense of himself as a leader appeared to form through the negotiated process of granting and claiming described by DeRue & Ashford (2010). The negotiated identity within the PCoP and within their businesses was acted out throughout the program duration, whereby the identity of owner-managers was used as the inquiry for their personal leadership development. As they journeyed through the program, becoming members of the PCoP, they malleably developed their own sense of identification with the form of leader they aspired to become. Within an action-learning set Frances commented: 'I feel like I'm learning to be a leader. I have to do this, after all I am the leader, I know I didn't want to be but it's tough, I know I am now!' The point of the malleable learning journey of the becoming in the PCoP and becoming in their businesses was similarly captured by Brendan: 'People at work have noticed a change, I'm more confident and that is good for the business ... sales are up and I now have a three-year plan, we never had anything like that before.' Brendan and Frances, along with the other owner-managers, shaped the emergence of PCoP whilst contemporaneously shaping their sense of themselves as leaders and their practice of leading. Becoming a PCoP member and learning to become a leader were mutually enhancing. Gloria succinctly captured this during a shadowing feedback session stating that she 'is acting as a leader and this is impacting on the way I work and the way my team treat me, it's definitely having a positive effect.'

Element #5: PCoP members' experiences as owner-managers informing and driving the curriculum and the experience informing their practice

In order for the program to link across to the businesses, the members needed to be able to draw upon the meanings, experiences and languages of their businesses. This engaged them in a process that called upon their own experience (and each other's, vicariously) to contribute to

and, to a large extent, drive the curriculum. The parallel participation in their SMEs led to this circulation of knowledge becoming learned and developed collectively, applied and tested in a variety of situations. This was continuously brought back into the dialogical circle for further examination. Emerging in the PCoP was a mutually supportive process of addressing the particular needs of each owner-manager. This was not a passive process. The members took responsibility and accountability for both their own and collective learning through shaping the emergent curriculum. The consequence was the strong connectivity of practices and identities of both PCoP membership becoming and ‘leader becoming’ in the SMEs described in Element #4. (When we speak here of ‘leader becoming’ we are suggesting an on-going development process constructed through participation with others; as opposed to the more common phrase ‘becoming a leader’ which implies a final outcome). We show here an extract from an observation of an action-learning set of the flow of conversation that captured the essence of how the owner-managers’ experiences and issues drove the curriculum:

The facilitator checks whether this is the direction Gloria wants to go down, she looks at her set members and says, ‘I feel like talking it through is helping, I know you understand.’ Anthony laughs and says that her issue sounds extremely familiar and he then tells Gloria a story from his own experience about an issue he thinks is similar to hers. The facilitator points out that this is unique to her own experience and turns to Gloria saying, ‘but will it work for you?’ Solomon, who has been quietly listening, responds instead, ‘You’ve actually just given me an idea of what to do with my Manchester office, I hadn’t thought of that before.’

This extract illustrates a back-and-forth movement of dialogue in the PCoP that becomes a prompt for ‘leader becoming’ in their respective businesses. This dialogic movement

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represents: first, PCoP discussion on a challenge or opportunity related to their business; secondly, dialogue within their businesses, applying their learning in the workplace and practicing newly learned techniques with their teams; and, thirdly, dialogue within the PCoP reflecting on progress. The sense of how becoming a full member of the PCoP and the skills and shared repertoire of the PCoP flowed across to the business context is illustrated in how the methods learned in coaching and action learning were adopted. For example, using open questioning as the main form of enquiry, and positioning the route forward in the hands of the issue holder became commonly used to address a problem or opportunity in the businesses. The observation of the action-learning set above describes practices of the PCoP becoming the practices of business leadership, enabling their teams to problem-solve themselves. An owner-manager replaces the leadership role of ‘expert with all the answers’ with that of one who leads by guiding colleagues to find collective solutions.

In summary, our research offers up a pedagogic heuristic centered on how a PCoP can be cultivated within a leadership-development program. The value of the heuristic in the context of working with owner-managers is to enable the connectivity of their SME context with the program. The heuristic gives insight in to how an emergent curriculum responds to the issues drawn from the SME contexts. At the same time, the heuristic forges practices within the PCoP that have resonance to the owner-managers’ contexts. The opportunities the heuristic offers need to be considered in balance with the challenges it presents. Our discussion examines both of these aspects.

Discussion

Our research questions sought to understand how and where learning took place within a leadership development program for owner-managers of SMEs. The grounded-theory analysis identified the phenomenon of a learning community – in particular, the notion of a PCoP. Building on Pattinson et al. (2016) we suggest there are four principles to guide leadership development, based on developing a PCoP as a learning community:

First, we give attention to the collective learning endeavor of a community of practice.

This is the pursuit of a shared enterprise that is: the property of a community; created over time; embedded within activity; and concerned with shared knowing, shared doing and negotiated meaning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, 2010; Howorth et al., 2012). Gherardi, Nicolini & Odella (1998). These aspects of the shared enterprise underscore the point that learning within a CoP is not an individual phenomenon, but rather as ‘taking place among and through other people’ (274).

Secondly, that learning is not conceived as a way of coming to know the world, but as a way of *becoming* part of the social world ‘in an ongoing practice ... while contributing to the shared activity’ (Gherardi et al. 1998:276). Leadership development is then interconnected with the person and the community; between people rather than within someone (Fox, 1997). This relational view of the person and learning is an integral and inseparable aspect of participation in communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Thirdly, that the person is impacted within and beyond the CoP through participation in a number of social contexts within a number of CoPs (Brown and Duguid, 2001; Wenger, Dermot and Snyder, 2002; Pattinson et al., 2016). This principle offers up the opportunity to link the relational becoming outlined in the second principle to both the

organizational context and to the leadership development context. This happens through participation as a full member of the PCoP, whilst at the same time being a member in other CoPs (of significance here is the organization). Fourthly, that a PCoP can be cultivated and managed through considered governance, with an emphasis toward the critical role of facilitation from the educator in a way that will help the community develop. The cultivation of a PCoP is concerned with providing the learning infrastructure to support the emergence and ongoing development of a peer-learning community, and therefore stimulate the development of individual members.

To be able to use these principles within leadership development necessitates a different epistemological assumption of learning than might be normally be understood: from learning as an individual 'entitative' orientation, where someone acquires knowledge and skill from a program that can be applied in another context. Instead these principles demand learning that is interconnected with others through the negotiation of meanings as the consequence of shared endeavors. Learning that malleably shapes a person's and community's sense of identity, practice and collective becoming. In a metaphorical sense the individual, in terms of an owner-manager, is a full member of both the PCoP and the small business CoP, and acts as a 'catalyst' in the becoming dynamic of both CoPs. This, then, is our theorizing of how an organization can be impacted through the cultivation of a PCoP in a leadership-development program using these four principles. We are not aware of empirical research that has sought to identify how a PCoP can be utilized for leadership development. We offer the pedagogic heuristic as an explanation; the five elements capture the social process of the PCoP occurring in the program. The significance of the cultivation of the PCoP is towards the

enhancement of leadership-development effectiveness. This relates to how managers learn to lead in their everyday endeavors: that is, through social learning. CoPs are essentially a social-learning dynamic. The use of a PCoP as outlined in the pedagogic heuristic can complement the social-learning dynamics of organizational contexts.

The advantages offered by developing a PCoP point to a stronger sense of impact that is more enduring because of the alignment with the organization through addressing the everyday concerns and actions of managers within the PCoP. Such concerns and actions form the emergent curriculum that the PCoP addresses. The enactment of the pedagogic heuristic generates a closely bound, trusting community to tackle these complex leadership challenges. Yet, designing for and cultivating a PCoP is not without its own significant pedagogic and practical challenges.

Challenge #1 – PCoP as a context for social learning

Engagement in social learning to enable leadership development is the essence of what a PCoP is seeking to offer. For social learning to occur, the PCoP requires a gestation period. The cohorts we have been working with have typically lasted for ten months. It is highly problematic for this period to be greatly reduced if leadership development through social learning is to occur. In this way, the efficiency of a ‘boot-camp’ type module cannot be utilized, because the curriculum is emergent. As themes, issues, questions and experiences arise from the members, then the curriculum that is relevant to them in their everyday endeavors becomes manifest: a curriculum that is capable of being translated and applied to their practices, because it is drawn from their practices. Some challenging questions emerge here: Can sufficient time be made available? Can members be at ease with the notion of an emergent curriculum? Which experiences are most essential for the stimulation of social

learning? For example, informal conversation appears disproportionately more important than organized formal events – allowing for the happenchance to occur. However, without the formal events as a reason for being together as a PCoP, the unexpected and unscripted is much less likely to occur at a time when the emergent social learning can be exploited. In essence, there is a need for learners to move away from an expectation of being taught and committing to an emergent social-learning pedagogy.

Challenge #2: The learners' engagement and commitment

We have noticed that the PCoP does not impact on all members, nor in a similar way. In speaking with other providers in testing our explanation of how to construct a PCoP, comments were offered on variability of outcomes as a consequence of member disposition, openness and commitment. CoPs develop shared practices, meaning and identities through a trajectory of participation. Some members do remain on the periphery; a form of parsimonious engagement. Most evident to us and the other providers is a distribution of commitment. The greater the degree of commitment and participation, the more abundant and multifarious are the social-learning engagements and a commensurate sense of becoming an active and full member of the PCoP (and subsequently the development of their leadership capabilities). Key aspects orient around selection and induction processes to sensitize expectations of the social-learning pedagogy. Commensurate with an appreciation of the pedagogy is the requirement of commitment and participation. In no small part these are demanding expectations of members, and pose significant challenges for them and for the enablers (third challenge addressed shortly). The expectation on members is that they should enable open access to their business and leadership challenges for examination and comparison. In this way the various organizational contexts become sites of learning and change within the organization.

Challenge #3: Demanding expectations on ‘enablers’

A facilitative skill is required to understand the role of enabling social learning. In the first instance, embracing a pedagogy in which the curriculum emerges is most challenging; the challenge is compounded by a need to convince members to ‘trust the process’. Trusting the process for enablers poses some big questions: When to intervene and what to intervene about? What is it that enablers are enabling? How does an emerging curriculum head in the right direction? What, in fact, is the right direction? How do enablers engage learners who are on the periphery of the PCoP? And, related to the last question, how do enablers recognize how peripheral or central the learners are? We do not seek to suggest easy answers to these questions. We have wrestled with these ourselves. Our attention has been to recognize the circulation of knowledge and meanings between members in order to point to the emerging construction of the PCoP.

The challenge of enabling the members to participate in the co-construction of the curriculum requires a fundamental shift in the learning philosophy: from a content orientation with a planned curriculum, to a process orientation to stimulate social learning through an emergent curriculum. The notion of an emergent curriculum suggests it happens in a similar manner for all learners. However, it seems plausible that examining curriculum emergence might reflect bespoke emergent curricula across the cohort related to individual learner needs and challenges. Speaking with other providers of the program, we are confident that embracing the emergent curriculum does require attention. Additionally, the challenge is more than developing skill and commitment to social learning and addressing the emergent curriculum. There is a challenge to an educator’s sense of identity and shift of power (Iszatt-White, Kempster & Carroll, 2017) associated with moving away from content expertise and flowing

with the vulnerability of a pedagogy of the unknowable (Hibbert and Cunliffe, 2015:186).

Perhaps the most challenging aspect in pursuing a PCoP is the orientation towards developing practice embedded in relationships. This requires a shift in educational epistemology: away from learner as entity, where development is towards generic skills applicable in multiple contexts; to learner embedded within relational practices, where development is focused on becoming a central member of the PCoP.

Limitations of the research

Arguably the most notable limitation is that of researcher bias, in the sense of overlap between our roles as program facilitators and as researchers. Yet the access that such joint roles provided to be able to obtain the rich qualitative data was, we suggest, most necessary in order to understand the socio-cultural dynamic of the cohort as they traveled along their journey of learning. Without such access, it would be problematic to see the PCoP emerge and develop, or to be able to give insight to the constituent elements that formed the PCoP. In the seven stages of our grounded-theory approach we tested our emerging social process / pedagogic heuristic with other providers of the program. The discussion that followed provided useful triangulation, as well as challenges to our interpretation of the data. In some ways it gave confidence, in that the bias was tested and found not to have distorted the argument of what we had found. The second prominent limitation is that of investigating a single cohort and developing theory from one case situation. We recognize this limitation. However, we feel confident that although the research here is with a single cohort, we have strong evidence that this does resonate with other providers and with our own experiences of running this program for 12 years. The pedagogic heuristic speaks to a learning process. The emphasis that

providers place on the elements will vary by cohort character and composition as well as by provider competence and sense of confidence with handling an emergent curriculum, and indeed the possibility of multiple curricula bespoke to each manager’s situation. So, variation is to be expected – and arguably encouraged – to meet the bespoke learning needs of members and the PCoP. The third limitation is the constituent members of the cohort – SME owner-managers. The centrality and influence of the owner-managers within their respective business enables the flow back-and-forth of learning and participation. It may be that employed managers experience restrictions in terms of centrality and influence within their organizations. As a consequence, a different form of participation and social learning may occur within a PCoP, generating an alternative manifestation of a PCoP. Research could explore the various approaches of enablers in addressing the context of middle managers as compared to owner-managers.

The fourth limitation of the findings relates to the non-credit bearing context of the educational program. If a credit bearing course has a prescribed curriculum with linked learning outcomes, then the pedagogic heuristic we have outlined could be problematic in terms of addressing student development and emergent events. However, where credit bearing courses gives increased prominence to reflexivity, then the aspects of the pedagogic heuristic are most applicable. For example, a course which seeks to embrace learning from the student’s lived experience and is centered on collaborative student engagement. The key is the commitment and applicability of addressing the 5 elements of the pedagogic heuristic. We offer a set of questions to probe such commitment and application of the heuristic: does the pedagogy create a joint enterprise and sense of mutual engagement? Does the program focus on skills development and identity development? Can the pedagogy embrace the emergent

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events of students' lives or draw on project activity created as part of the program? How central is shared understanding developed through dialogue to aspects of assessment? And related to the last question how flexible can assessment be to embrace aspects of shared understanding and identity construction. If assessment is focused on reflexivity of the cohort experiences then the PCoP should be most applicable.

Conclusion

As we noted at the outset of this article, leadership practice develops through social learning, as a complex blend of life-course experiences that are contextualized through social learning to emerge into nuanced practices and identities. Because a PCoP reflects these dynamics, it provides a useful mechanism within formal management education programs to advance leadership development. The ability to cultivate a PCoP within management education thus offers a useful contribution, despite the challenges we have outlined.

The opportunity of CoP theory within management education is to orient pedagogy toward relational practices and identities. By considering cultivating a PCoP in management education, a different agenda for educationalists is on offer: an educational epistemology centered on relational practices and identities to generate enduring aspects of learning. It is, though, an alternative experience for learners and indeed educators, requiring a shift in expectations from being taught with an explicit curriculum, to collectively learning around an emergent curriculum.

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Table 1: Learning interventions and anticipated learning outcomes

Learning Activity	Description	Anticipated learning outcomes for delegates
Overnight experiential	The program began with a two-day experiential workshop with a focus on leadership development activities	To begin to build a bond with and trust one another To begin to reflect on their own leadership practices and the aspirations they have for their businesses
Masterclasses	10 half-day sessions over the duration focused on leadership and business development delivered by inspirational business speakers and academics	To generate insights, inspiration, discussion and reflection
Business coaching	Six one-to-one coaching sessions with a business coach	To provide a confidential space to work through leadership challenges
Action-learning sets	Six half-day sessions with a facilitator and six delegates	To work on real-life business issues using open questions to explore multiple solutions
Business shadowing and exchanges	In pairs, owner-managers shadowed one another and carried out an exchange in each other's business	To learn about each other's organizations, get feedback on their own leadership style and see their own organization through a fresh pair of eyes
Learning and reflection sessions	Three full-day sessions	To reflect, share learning and plan actions
Online discussion forum	Chat forum and private individual learning logs	To support communication and interaction when not physically together Learning logs provide a confidential space to encourage reflection and action planning

Table 2: Biographical information about the research participants (pseudonyms used for all people)

Name (pseudonym)	Age range	Gender	Turnover range	Number of employees	Sector
Anthony	40-50	M	£1m - £3m	>100	Cleaning
Alan	41-50	M	£1m - £3m	50-100	Creative
Brendan	41-50	M	£100k - £500k	<10	Security
Cuthbert	41-50	M	£500k - £1m	10-49	Software
Derrick	30-40	M	£500k - £1m	<10	Services
Daniel	30-40	M	>£3m	50-100	Recruitment
Damian	30-40	M	£1m - £3m	10-49	Printing
Drew	41-50	M	£100k - £500k	10-49	Finance
Frances	30-40	F	£100k - £500k	10-49	Restaurant
Gloria	51-60	F	>£3m	50-100	Food production
Guy	51-60	M	<£100k	<10	Property
Jonah	30-40	M	£100k - £500k	10-49	Technology
Jackie	30-40	F	£100k - £500k	<10	Retail
Jenny	41-50	F	£100k - £500k	<10	Printing
Jason	30-40	M	£1m - £3m	10-49	Services
Martha	41-50	F	£100k - £500k	<10	Finance
Matthew	21-30	M	£100k - £500k	<10	Recruitment
Mary	30-40	F	£100k - £500k	<10	Telecomms
Patrick	51-60	M	£500k - £1m	<10	Power supply
Rickin	30-40	M	£1m - £3m	10-49	Retail

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Richard	30-40	M	£1m - £3m	10-49	Manufacturer
Reg	21-30	M	£1m - £3m	10-49	PR
Solomon	30-40	M	£1m - £3m	10-49	Services
Ted	41-50	M	£1m - £3m	10-49	Animation
Victor	41-50	M	£1m - £3m	10-49	Services

Figure 1: Pedagogic heuristic to develop a program community of practice (PCoP)

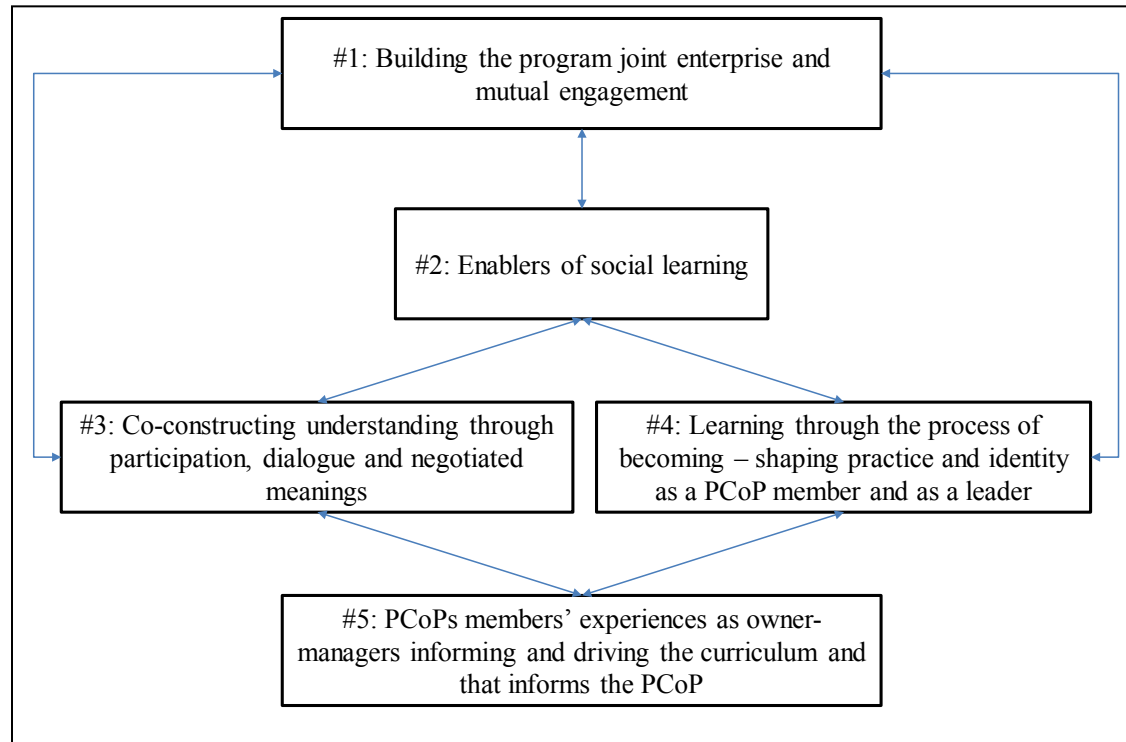


Table 3: Example of the coding procedure in practice

Open codes	Axial codes	Selective code Applicable across the axial codes	Social process as the grounded theory applicable across the selective codes

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Isolation; loneliness; craving others in same situation; need for external validation; value of networking	Linking to peers	Desiring a learning community that is supportive and shares common objectives	Program community of practice (PCoP) as a learning community
Growth aspiration; feelings of being able to do better; desire for leadership development; personal skills; no formal education; wanting to do better; leadership development condition of a loan; work-life balance.	Seeking a learning opportunity	Facilitators enabling a range of learning moments Learning through becoming a member of the learning community Using participants' experiences as owner-managers to shape the community learning	
Access to chambers of commerce; business link guidance; advice from others; link to the university	Drawing on opportunities	Learning through participation and conversation	
Environment at work; get away from office; away from systems in the office; get away to the university	Away from office enables learning		