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The Disembodied Apprentice: Reflections on a doctoral exchange

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Background
My presentation today shares my reflections on the pedagogical experience of being involved in an international exchange for doctoral students. To contextualise my reflections, a bit of background information is in order. I am a full-time on-campus PhD candidate in the Faculty of Education, Deakin University. My PhD is one component of an ARC Linkage Project between Deakin University and Smart Geelong Region Local Learning and Employment Network (SGR LLEN). The broader project is concerned with researching learning networks as a policy mechanism for understanding and managing risk for young people.

Within this broader project my candidature involves me in completing an ethnographic case study of the SGR LLEN. I am using a participatory methodology, acting as a participant observer in a community network as well us undertaking both co-structured and semi-structured interviews, an archival review and working with a reflective journal. However, given the ARC Linkage Project team within which my research is based I am also a participant observer in an academic community: both my supervisors are on the project team as are two other academics, a research assistant and the Executive Officer of my research site (the industry partner in our Project). Furthermore, I have a number of roles within the academic community as post-graduate student representative on two Committees. Finally, I also have a community of friends within the academic community.

As such, the nature of my PhD candidature stands in contrast to the more common experience of the Education doctoral candidate: often part-time, off campus and somewhat isolated from the academic community while interacting, to a greater or lesser extent, with a principal and/or associate supervisor. My reflections were prompted by a further contrast experienced through the opportunity to interact with another academic community: the academics and higher degree students involved in our exchange with the
University of Wisconsin – Madison. Although it had been evident to some degree in the on-line interaction, it was not until the entire exchange community met face-to-face in Madison in April 2004, that the influence of our diverse pedagogies struck me. The Madison students impressed all of us as being very well grounded theoretically, no doubt a reflection in part of the depth of the course work component of their candidatures. In contrast they appeared struck by our mode of independent research, the way we would take theories and apply them to our own studies. Their journey from knowledge transmission to knowledge production was by way of a more structured route, more closely supervised; ours was more fluid, less closely supervised. As an example of this, some of the student feedback on my paper in which I had drawn on poststructural approaches was to prompt discussion as to whether one could combine given theoretical approaches. This was in reference to my perspective that while poststructural approaches provided concepts that enabled me to shed explanatory light on the data, I would also draw on structural approaches to frame up how the data being used by government had been acquired in the first place. As Denzin (2005) notes, such data has often been born of methodological conservatism. These alternative approaches to analysis, one rhizomatic and the other arborescent, do not form a binary. Structural, or arborescent, modelling is:

a selective reading of a rhizome. Each tree model is merely the attempt to suppress the unstable, plural and dynamic nature of things by emphasising one of its aspects or dimensions and pretending that that one feature summarises the meaning of the whole (Mansfield 2000, p.146)

As Wagner notes, existing theories, methods, and perceptions can keep us from seeing phenomena as clearly as we might (1993 cited Gough 2002). My focus was on how to let the data tell its story in discursive context rather than remaining obedient to a given epistemological perspective. Such an approach accords with Gough’s (2002) assertion that we should recognise that knowledge is both representational and performative, our concern can be with ‘what should we do?’. As doctoral students required to make a substantial original contribution to knowledge there appears to be an argument to be made for developing both a strong theoretical base as well as independence and creativity that allows us to move beyond a master’s, or supervisor’s, tracing which, for Deleuze and Guattari, will always by necessity come back to the same (1987, pp.12-13). Such an approach is inherently in ‘the spirit of Deleuze’s project, namely the rejection of all forms of slavishness in favour of a (liberating) creativity (Buchanan 2000 cited Honan 2004, p. 268); a fundamental recognition that what we are doing, regardless of the structure of our candidatures, is bringing something new to life (Semetsky 2004).

**Legitimate peripheral participation**

In reflecting on this moment in my doctoral experience I was reminded of Lave and Wenger’s (1991) centred view of the apprenticeship and subsequent theory of legitimate peripheral participation. This theory explores the nature of situated learning by moving the focus from the observation and imitation that occurs between the master and his or her apprentice to the learning that occurs within the community of which the master forms a part and in which learning occurs as access to practice. Such a perspective appears to respond to the challenge faced by the academic ‘master’:
‘In discipline after discipline, [the postmodern turn] raises issues of epistemology and the processes of intellectual and textual production, in a way that is cumulatively so radical that the previous practices of disciplinary knowledge can no longer be assumed as given by those aspiring to profess them at any level’ (Hodge cited Kelly and Thorpe nd, p.147)

At the same time, such tensions are ‘productive of new forms of PhD personhood’ (Kelly and Thorpe nd, p.147). The academic apprentice is increasingly caught between the modern and the postmodern; a reflection of the changed conditions of the learning space where the division of the world into ‘co-ordinated parts – fixed truth, knowing subject and simple representation’ has been subverted (Mansfield 2000, p.139).

Lave & Wenger (1991) argue this represents the contrast between internalisation and participation. In the internalisation model which, I am suggesting, is the basis for the more common doctoral experience, learning is commonly taken as a process by which a learner internalizes knowledge whether discovered, received or experienced. In contrast in the participation model which, I am further suggesting, reflects my own doctoral experience, learning is taken as increasing participation in communities of practice – the whole person acting in the world. And it is in this way that a sense of assemblage as ‘academic’ occurs:

all the effects of psychological interiority … are constituted through the linkage of humans into other objects and practices, multiplicities and forces. It is these various relations and linkages which assemble subjects; they themselves give rise to all the phenomena through which, in our own times, human beings relate to themselves in terms of a psychological interior: as … thinking selves … intending selves capable of acting as subjects (Mansfield 2000, p.172).

The Disembodied Apprentice

From the perspective of participation, mastery lies not with a master but within the community of practice of which the master forms a part. In my case this includes a cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional team of academics and other doctoral ‘apprentices’. It also involves the broader community group involved in my doctoral research in which my supervisors have only a peripheral role. At other times the role of master in the academic environment is mine: my doctoral research provides me with a level of expertise as regards my research subject that is of importance to the broader project team. In this context the nature of supervision has become more fluid, more collaborative, more negotiated and, possibly, more responsive to the needs of our uncertain times.

Given the limitations of time, only an indicative example of how this is experienced is possible. Communities of practice are conceptualised on two levels. Firstly, questions of practice which for Wenger (1998) include consideration of meaning, community, learning, boundaries and locality. Secondly, questions of identity which include consideration of identity in practice, participation, modes of belonging, identification and negotiability. My specific focus today is on practice as community.
Practice is ‘doing’ in the historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do. For Wenger, even when practice is fundamentally concerned with the production of theory, practice is central:

Even when it produces theory, practice is practice. Things have to be done, relationships worked out, processes invented, situations interpreted, artefacts produced, conflicts resolved. We may have different enterprises, which give our practices different characters. Nevertheless, pursuing them always involves the same kind of embodied, delicate, active, social, negotiated, complex process of participation (Wenger 1998, p.49).

Practice is both explicit and implicit. The explicit aspects of practice involve language, tools, documents, images, symbols, well-defined roles, specified criteria, codified procedures and so forth. This explicit practice is not only readily available to but is of central concern for all doctoral students and their supervisors regardless of whether they be on or off-campus, full or part-time.

The implicit aspects of practice involve relations, tacit conventions, subtle clues, untold rules of thumb, recognisable intuitions, specific perceptions, well-tuned sensitivities, embodied understanding and underlying assumptions. Perhaps access to some of this practice may be available to doctoral students through the use of on-line technologies however much would be unable to be accessed. It is inherently in the process of participation within a community that implicit practice is accessed and, thereby, learning as increasing participation in the community occurs. And, I would argue, that it is through increasing participation in the academic community that doctoral students gain the basis on which to move beyond what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as the ‘plane of organization … constantly trying to plug the lines of flight, stop or interrupt the movements of deterritorialization, weigh them down, restratify them, reconstitute forms and subjects in a dimension of depth’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p.270). Both implicit and explicit aspects of practice involve unmistakeable signs of membership in community and are crucial to the success of any venture. In the time that remains, I will briefly outline how practice acts as a source of community and how I experienced that in the context of the University of Wisconsin – Madison exchange.

**Practice as a source of community**

There are three dimensions of the relation by which practice is the source of coherence of a community: mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire. Firstly, mutual engagement is what defines a community: practice does not exist in the abstract. The coherence that enables engagement to become community involves work but it is often work of an invisible kind. What makes engagement productive is also a matter of diversity as much as it is about homogeneity: not only are people diverse but working together fosters differences as well as similarities. As such, mutual engagement often results in a tight node of interpersonal relationships that can be both positive and negative (Wenger 1998, p. 74-7). Certainly for our exchange the work of maintaining a sense of mutual engagement was arduous at times. As Wenger notes, embodiment is a central part of practice yet our practice was at once embodied and disembodied, fractured by on-line technologies yet cemented by face-to-face encounters. The diversity within this cross-
institutional community was pronounced and it was in the diversity-within-community that we found the beginnings of a multiplicity of lines of flight which, by using the writing of Deleuze and Guattari as a ‘jumping off point’ (Mansfield 2000, p.171), we have continued to pursue.

As a second dimension, joint enterprise involves negotiations that reflect the complexities of mutual engagement. The joint enterprise is defined by the participants in the process of pursuing it; as a negotiated response it is ‘owned’ in a profound way in spite of uncontrollable forces and influences. As it is based in negotiation, it gives rise to relations of mutual accountability (Wenger 1998, p.77-82). Within our exchange community we negotiated across time, space, discipline, culture, research focus, theory and gender. And yet as postgraduate students we are fundamentally constrained by the candidature requirements of our particular programs, universities and the limitations of time. Both during and since the exchange the joint enterprise that has become Deleuzist and the sense of mutual accountability has enabled us to persist in engaging with this enterprise even when it has appeared too hard, too complex, too time consuming.

Finally, community involves a dimension of shared repertoire. A repertoire gains coherence not as specific activities but because the activities belong to the practice of a community pursuing a given venture. The repertoire includes routines, words, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols and so on that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence. Shared repertoire reflects the history of mutual engagement at the same time as it remains inherently ambiguous; for Wenger (1998, p.82-4) both history and ambiguity are resources that can be put to work in producing new meanings:

Histories of interpretation create shared points of reference, but they do not impose meanings … This is true of linguistic and non-linguistic elements, of words as well as chairs, ways of walking … or laughter. All have well-established interpretations, which can be re-utilized to new effects, whether these new effects simply continue an established trajectory of interpretation or take it in unexpected directions (Wenger 1998, p.83)

Wenger notes that ambiguity is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it makes coordination and communication difficult, unpredictable and labour intensive. On the other hand, ambiguity ensures communities of practice remain dynamic, open-ended and generative. In the context of our exchange our repertoire has gained coherence from its very ambiguity: as the following presentations will display, the coherence of our engagement has strengthened as the diverse lines of flight have gained momentum. This has been dependent on a blend of reified and participatory activities: readings, web-board discussions, video-conferencing, collaborative writing, simultaneous on-line chat, face-to-face meetings in Madison and Melbourne. At the same time, as a personal observation, some of our most dynamic work has occurred in recent months with the sustained involvement that has occurred between the Deakin participants; a

sustained engagement in shared practice is a dynamic form of coordination, one that generates “on the fly” the coordinated meanings that allow it to proceed (Wenger 1998, p. 84).
Pedagogical lines of flight…

In summary, the PhD experience has its basis in Western thought that commonly looks to produce from:

a mobile and unstable set of multiple relationships a single authoritative and stable structure that will revalidate the model of truth … a truth that depends on a stable, knowing and observing subject, a fixed and knowable object and a neutral system of representation. Yet these stabilities are an hallucination. Enfolded within each moment of analysis and observation are the many and transitory impulses that cross from subject to object, and from each of these to the text, passing their supposed fixed perimeters, linking whole dimensions of each in … ‘line[s] of flight’ … that ignore the ostensible fixed internal structure of apparently separate entities to produce new possibilities of assemblage (Mansfield 2000, p. 143-4).

Communities of practice are meaningful to both academic master and apprentice given the postmodern turn. In the peculiarly linguistic and linear endeavour that is PhD candidature reconceptualising doctoral pedagogies in ways that allow the notion of learning as the internalisation of knowledge to be complemented with the notion of learning as increasing participation in communities of practice has promise. This paper has explored the community of practice that frames my own candidature, with the international doctoral exchange as one component of that community. It suggests that such pedagogies have the potential to foster lines of flight that produce new possibilities of assemblage and thereby an enhanced ‘experimentation with the real’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p.12-3).

Bibliography