

Practitioners who were identified with these hybrid forms of practice recognised the concept when presented to them but had not used the concept explicitly in their descriptions of what they did. On the whole these individuals worked as an individual broker (rather than as a small team with inter-changing individuals) and these individuals identified themselves as self-motivated and active learners. Hybrid practitioners still identified with the practitioner group from whence they emerged rather than to a new generic community of practice. The degree to which these practices constituted radically new or incremental change was debated by the practitioners.

Although the individuals associated with hybrid practice were highly motivated and active learners, common sets of institutional conditions generated 'learning organisations' that allowed these practitioners to adapt their practice. These conditions were identified by practitioners but they were not always in place.

Supportive Conditions

Given benign external conditions, the conditions that practitioners identified as supportive within their local working context included:

- High level champion(s) within the strategic management of the initiative.
- Supportive/benignly permissive line management within the employing organisation.
- Opportunities to observe/be in proximity to different ways of working

Overall these conditions plus the learning characteristic of the individual led to the confidence to be intuitive that then supported intuitive and reactive forms of learning.



This research is one of 11 research projects commissioned from Universities across the UK, under the ESRC/HCA Academy Joint Targeted Initiative on Skills and Knowledge for Sustainable Communities.

To see how the HCA Academy is taking forward lessons from the research, visit:

<http://www.HCAcademy.co.uk/>

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Further details of projects, contacts and associated briefing papers can be found at:

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The Practice and Potential of Situated Social Learning

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Learning and Working Across Professions

Key Policy Implications

- New 'hybrid' practitioners are emerging among built environment professionals as practitioners face up to the challenges of building sustainable communities.
- In thinking about setting the right conditions for motivated practitioners to learn and adapt to changing demands of producing sustainable community, the learning agenda has to focus more on the creation of learning organisations.
- Learning organisations can support the emergence of learning and the adaptation of practice through strategic and line management styles that facilitate intuitive learning by individuals through building confidence.
- If adaptation is to depend more upon intuitive learning scenarios, there will be a need to re-stress the importance of values and ethics in the practice of practitioners.
- Learning how things get done in specific places amongst particular groups of people is important. Practitioners need situated knowledge as well as generic and technical knowledge to build sustainable communities.

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Key Words

■ Generic Skills ■ Sustainable Communities ■ Situated Learning ■ Social Learning



Background

A number of policy debates including the Egan Review (2004) have identified skills issues as a constraint on the development of sustainable communities. This research explores an argument that it is not just the lack of information, but wider systemic issues of how work is organised that restrict the ability of individuals to learn and change.

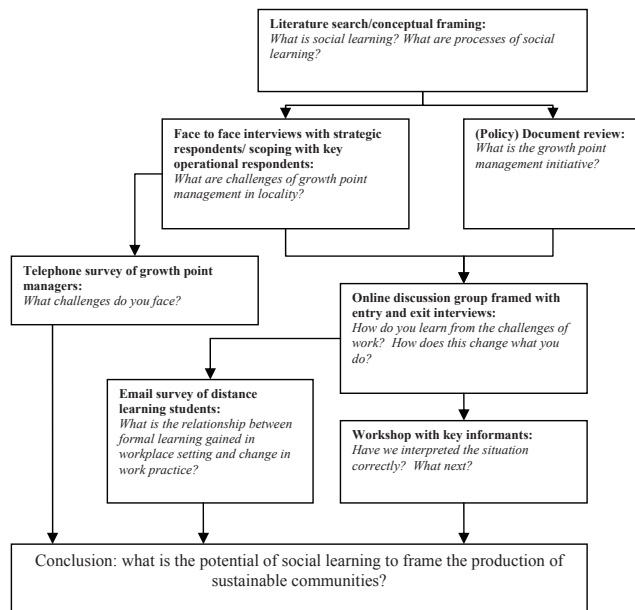
Approach

The research explores how individuals learn in the work place and how learning can be facilitated. It examines whether the capacity of individuals to learn and adapt their practice is just a function of the availability of knowledge and skills, or of the social context in which they practice. The approach links social learning theory with concepts of communities of practice and activity systems.

Fieldwork centred on staff working on a single, long term and complex project focused on sustainable development – the East Devon Growth Point Initiative.

‘A profession is better understood as an applied field rather than a discipline, because its rationale derives from its social purpose and not from any distinctive form of knowledge.’ Eraut, 2000

Structure and rationale of data collection methods



Findings

Four key learning scenarios were identified through the analysis of practitioners as they described and debated how they learnt to face the challenges of their work. These four scenarios were:

- Formal learning in the workplace (such as seminars, attendance of conferences, attendance of courses etc) where practitioners expected to attend events (often structured within continuing professional development) and to pick up knowledge.
- Structured experience in the workplace (mentoring, shadowing, etc) where practitioners were engaged in a learning experience. Typically younger practitioners would be paired with a more experienced colleague who would be tasked to demonstrate their experience. Experienced line managers would describe this as the way that they themselves learnt to become the practitioners they were because so many aspects of their work were not ‘written down’.
- Sub-contracted learning (for example, the use of consultants) was identified by practitioners as a means of learning specific pieces of knowledge such as understanding the financial valuations deployed by private sector developers. It was seen as a means of acquiring knowledge relatively quickly albeit at a financial cost and albeit in a form that dated.
- Intuitive/reactive workplace experience where practitioners found that they suddenly realised a key issue or insight. These moments were not always within work hours but could be experienced outside of work such as on the drive into work.

Respondents placed varying values on these different scenarios. For the most part, these learning moments are associated with the acquisition of knowledge in ways that practitioners recognise and can outline to another person. The issue of sub-contracted knowledge is not often identified as a learning scenario although practitioners commonly used consultants to address challenges associated with a lack of knowledge or perceived lack of skills (as well as shortages in staff)

Learning intuitively

The most interesting category was the process of intuitive and reactive learning. This is an area that has been explored in the lifelong learning literatures (see Eraut 2004). In this project participants were frequently unable to identify time to reflect and thus to engage in deliberative reflection. Instead practitioners spoke of learning by osmosis and of moments of realisation (described variously as eureka or ‘d’oh’ moments).

Even under pressure individuals have their ‘eureka moments’

Key practitioners

New forms of practice were evident in the emergence of particular forms of brokering and policy-delivery **hybrid practitioners**. These key individuals made links between the increasing number of stakeholder agencies by getting to know and talking to a wide range of practitioners. Often this work involved gaining trust and being proactive when problems emerged (such as around negotiating infrastructure agreements). The most common example of a hybrid practitioner was a planning practitioner who was juggling the achievement of local planning policy objectives and a financially viable planning scheme that would be built.

“a very important part of achieving things is knowing who to talk to, who to discuss things with. And obviously that’s a challenge with other organisations”

Strategic Planner