

---

# Learning and Identity in Overlapping Communities of Practice: Surf Club, School and Sports Clubs

Richard Light  
University of Sydney

Melanie Nash  
University of Melbourne

## Abstract

*Large numbers of children and young people spend their weekends and holidays engaged in the activities of over 300 surf clubs across Australia each summer. Long term membership in these clubs, beginning from as young as five years of age, forms a significant part of children's and young people's development yet surf clubs have yet to receive recognition from researchers in either the education or physical education fields as significant learning sites. Within the context of growing recognition of learning as an ongoing, multidimensional and life-long process this represents an oversight in the literature that this paper sets out to redress. Employing the concepts of communities of practice and situated learning (Lave & Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998) it examines four young people's experiences as members of a Victorian surf club as a community of practice. It also compares the experiences of these young people in the surf club with those arising from membership in their schools and sports clubs.*

## Introduction

In 2007 the surf life saving movement will celebrate 100 years since the establishment of the first surf club in Australia. Over this period surf clubs have come to form a unique, highly visible and significant part of Australian culture. Every year 7000 competitors take part in the national surf life saving championships and the NSW 'nippers' (Junior Surf Life Saving) championships is the biggest junior sport event in the southern hemisphere involving over 4000 7-13 year-old competitors. For large numbers of Australian children membership in a surf club forms a central part of their

lives over the summer months. For example, at the Victorian club where this study was conducted 500 children aged from 5 to 13 can be found training every Sunday morning in its 'nippers' junior activity program. These children and many thousands of young adolescents spend much of their summers deeply involved in the range of practices and discourses that constitute surf clubs in Australia.

While surf clubs have received some attention from sports historians and sociologists (for example see, Booth 2001, Booth & Tatz 2000, Brawley 1995, Pearson 1979) they are yet to receive recognition in the education or physical education literature as significant sites of learning. Given the growing recognition of learning as an ongoing, life-long process and the large numbers of children and young people involved in them we suggest that this represents an oversight in the education and physical education literature. In setting out to redress this oversight this paper examines young people's learning through participation as members of a Victorian surf club. Using the concepts of communities of practice and situated learning (Lave & Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998) it compares the experiences of four young people in a surf club with their experiences of school and sports clubs to highlight the nature of learning taking place through membership in the surf club.

Although we look at the participants' experiences at school and their experiences in sports clubs our focus remains on what is learnt and how it is learnt through membership in the surf club when viewed as a community of practice. It is, however, through exploring the differences between, the surf club, school and sports clubs that we are able to highlight the deeply situated nature of learning that occurs at the surf club. We compare the participants' reflections upon school and sports clubs with the surf club to make sense of their learning in the club and its relation to their lives, interests and aspirations.

## **The development and function of surf clubs in Australia**

There is some contention over the details but either North Bondi or Bronte was the first club established in Australia in 1907 with North Steyne established soon after in the same year. The Surf Bathing Association of NSW was formed during the same year that saw rapid growth of surf clubs throughout Sydney and then throughout Australia. State Centres for Surf Life Saving were subsequently established in 1925 in Western Australia, 1930/31 in Queensland and 1946 in Victoria. There are now over 100,000 members of surf clubs in Australia with 25,000 volunteers patrolling over 400 beaches. Of the 302 surf clubs in Australia, 59 are in Victoria covering 950 kilometres of coastline. There are approximately 40,000 junior members known as 'nippers' in Australia with 5,500 registered in Victoria in the 2004/2005 season. 1200 nippers competed in the 2003/04 Victorian Junior Surf Life Saving championships. Nippers

programs for children and youth from five years old to thirteen were introduced in the mid 60s (initially for boys only) as a means of boosting falling active membership (Booth 1994). They have since developed as an important means of reproducing surf club communities. Nippers programs run over summer on most Australian beaches patrolled by surf clubs. They are focused on children enjoying themselves as they learn basic surf skills and develop knowledge of the ocean. As children progress they also learn life saving skills and develop skills and capacities for entering competition if they wish to. Young people graduating from nippers move into the cadets program (14 to 18 years) but there is a considerable drop out rate that Surf Life Saving Australia is developing initiatives to counter. There were 40,000 nippers nationally in 2003/04 but only 5,000 cadets. In Victoria there were 5,500 nippers registered and 1,200 cadets.

Surf clubs are self-funding volunteer organisations that deliver the important community service of ensuring safe bathing. Competition forms the other important and interrelated aspect of a club's functioning. Competition was introduced very soon after the initial spread of surf clubs in Sydney in the first decade of the twentieth century and was developed to help maintain the fitness of lifesavers for their duties. It was also found to be a positive recruitment method as it attracted new members ensuring the growth and maintenance of club membership. By 1915 the first interclub championships were held in NSW and competition has since formed an important and very visible practice of surf clubs across Australia. As well as raising the profile of the clubs surf carnivals provide valuable exposure for the many sponsors that are required to keep clubs financially viable. The core practices of competition and patrolling beaches are inextricably linked and it is the relationship between the two practices that can shape the cultures of different clubs.

### **Situated Learning**

In this paper we use Lave and Wenger's (1991) concepts of communities of practice, situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation as a means of understanding the learning arising from our four participants' long-term membership in a surf club. The concept of situated learning implies comprehensive understandings involving the whole person and the world within which he/she lives as he/she engages in 'activity with and in the world' (Lave & Wenger 1991). Lave and Wenger stress the importance of engagement in the practices of a community of practice as a means of learning and mastering the understandings and skills required to live in a community. From a situated learning perspective, participating in practice is learning. Effective and meaningful learning thus involves learning how to do practices through participating in them. Learning is then an 'inseparable part of social practice' (Lave & Wenger 1991, p. 32) in which the learner engages in performance through co-participation with others.

### **Legitimate peripheral participation**

The term legitimate peripheral participation is intended by Lave and Wenger (1991) to be a positive and empowering term. It describes a position in a community of practice that provides increasing access to resources for learning. There is no centre in a community of practice and no linear path of skill acquisition. Instead, there is progression toward fuller, more mature participation in the activities and practices of the community that involves a process of, 'understanding through growing involvement' (Lave & Wenger 1991, p. 36).

## **Research Method**

### **The Site**

The surf club referred to here under the pseudonym of the Ocean Village Surf Club (OVSC) is one of the older and larger clubs in Victoria established over 50 years ago. It is situated in a small coastal community that is a popular holiday destination over summer. We refer to the seaside village within which the club is located as Ocean Village.

### **The participants and data generation**

We used in-depth, semi-structured interviews, field notes and observations to generate data. Four key informants formed the primary source of data generation and a series of three in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant over the summer season. Our four key informants were adolescent members of the club and chosen at random from those who were available over the period of the study. They comprised two boys and two girls. In addition to our four key participants, we conducted single semi-structured interviews with three senior members of the club. All participants in the study are referred to by pseudonyms.

### **The participants**

The four key informants were fourteen at the time of the study, had all earned their Surf Rescue Certificate (SRC) and were patrolling regularly. They are referred to in this paper under the pseudonyms of Peter, Lonny, Monte and Emma. Peter and Monte were both locals while Lonny lived in Melbourne and Emma lived in Geelong (30 minutes by car from Ocean Village). Lonny's family had a holiday house in Ocean Village and spent most of the Christmas school holidays with his parents there. Emma travelled from Geelong each weekend. All four key informants did patrol duties, but Peter and Emma concentrated on inter club competition while Lonny and Monte both preferred patrolling.

Rocky was one of the senior members of the club that we interviewed. He was a nineteen-year old local who attended university in Melbourne. Rocky went through the nippers and cadets programs, taught nippers and was teaching cadets at the time of the study. Mark was also a senior member of the club in his late thirties who had worked in Australia and overseas as a professional lifeguard.

### **Analysis**

Analysis was conducted using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss 1967). This involved a cycle of generating data, identifying emerging themes (Patton 1980) and developing substantive theory that was then tested by further data generation in an ongoing process. These substantive theories were then linked to more formal theory in the later stages of the research during which we drew on Lave & Wenger's (1991) analytic concepts of situated learning and communities of practice. As we did not have access to the participants' schools or other sports clubs, in which they participated, we relied solely on comments offered during their interviews at the surf club relating to these sites. By identifying patterns and using these to seek out supporting data in subsequent interviews, we attempted to qualify emerging trends and then used the community of practice/situated learning lens to interpret our data. Our major themes are the nature of the learning that has occurred, the formation of identity and the relevance to the continuation of the community of practice.

## **The Ocean Village surf club**

### **The nippers' structure**

The journey toward becoming a lifesaver began with entry into the nippers program for the four young people in this study. Once young people graduate from the nippers at the age of fourteen they enter the cadet program (14 to 19 years) where training is much more focused on the specific skills of life saving. This is the stage that our four participants were at in this study. They had all entered nippers at a young age, had progressed through the nippers program, and had just graduated into the cadets. The nippers program at Ocean Village is immensely popular with over 500 children/youngsters training over the summer during which we were at the club. The program emphasises enjoyment, learning about the ocean and surf safety. Nippers programs channel large numbers of children into clubs, but the numbers diminish significantly by the time they are ready to graduate to cadets. While clubs in NSW and Queensland will usually run their nippers programs for five to six months, clubs in Victoria have shorter seasons due to the colder water.

Nippers sessions typically ran for an hour and a half to two hours at Ocean Village. Each age group had an age group manager and a number of assistants who were

usually parents. A typical nippers training session involved moving through several activities such as beach sprints, board paddling, wading races or the flag race. The flag race involves children lying face down with feet pointing toward plastic 'flags' planted in the sand with fewer 'flags' than there are competitors who must run and dive to claim a 'flag'. Throughout all of their training nippers learn the skills and understandings needed to perform the core practices of the club: life saving and competing. As the nippers move upward through the age groups they do more water activities including surf swimming, board paddling, and ski paddling. This involves movement toward a position as a lifesaver. Through these activities they come to know the ocean in an embodied way over years of experience swimming and paddling in it. This is supplemented with occasional lessons that might typically involve instruction on 'reading the surf' or rescue and resuscitation techniques. Such lessons might involve viewing a video in the clubhouse or brief direct instruction during performance of practice in the surf.

### **The participants**

For over half their young lives Emma, Monte, Lonny and Peter had looked forward to summer and the rich social environment of the club for three months of patrolling, competing and the other duties and activities that they were typically involved in at the Ocean Village Surf Club. Lonny had joined at the age of five and had been in the club for nine years. He lived in Melbourne and said that he and his family had been spending their summers at Ocean Village for as long as he could remember. For nine years summer involved a progressively deeper engagement in the activities of the club, increasing responsibility and rising status. Both his parents were involved in the club. His father was a long-time member of the club who taught a nippers age group, his older sister had been in the club as long as he had. His mother had been a nippers age group manager and, at the time of the study, was heavily involved in an organisational and management role. His whole family was deeply involved in the club and it had become a central part of his life. Emma lived in Geelong, about 30 minutes away, and joined the club when she was nine. Her family was also involved. Her father was a life member of the club, her mother an associate member, and her sister was in the nippers. Monte's brother was a prominent senior member of the club, her cousin was in the club and she had a few schoolmates who were still in the club. Peter had a couple of cousins at the club and a few friends from school.

For the participants summer had come to mean deep involvement in club life. Over this time they had moved from quite peripheral engagement in the practices of the club as nippers in the younger age groups toward mature and deeper involvement. They had all passed the Surf Rescue Certificate (SRC) and had begun patrolling regularly over summer. They had joined the nippers between the ages of five and nine and, at the time of our study, were only one step away from becoming lifesavers.

They had been involved in providing a range of assistance over the summer and two had been involved in a rescue.

As children move up into the older age groups they are given increasing responsibility for assisting in helping younger members learn. Once in cadets, adolescent members often take on roles as age managers for nippers age groups as was the case for the young people in this study. There was a strong mentoring philosophy in the club. Lonny had completed a course on mentoring and was responsible for coordinating cadets mentoring in the club. While the cadets in this study were learning from instructors and informally from a range of senior people in the club they were also teaching younger children. Although the programs were organised in age groups there was considerable interaction and learning between them.

### **The nature of practice at the surf club**

Sunday training and the intensive camps that are run over summer at the Ocean Village Surf Club are structured to move children toward earning their Surf Rescue Certificate (SRC). This would typically lead to earning their Surf Bronze Medallion to qualify as lifesavers. Rocky explained how learning in the club could be very structured with children working toward gaining tangible achievements and leaders instructing for particular outcomes:

They're working toward awards so if they want to become a bronze medallion holder, they have to work. They have to learn how to do certain things. If they want to get higher awards they work (Rocky 2004).

Of the cadets in this study Lonny and Monte concentrated on patrolling while Emma and Peter favoured competing. They all, however, agreed that patrolling was the core practice of the surf club and stressed the public service that the club provided.

For Lonny patrolling was more satisfying and more important than competing: 'I think the most important thing is like the life saving which is more social and community-based (than competing)' (Lonny 2004). Monte competed in three carnivals a year and was, 'okay, but not really up there'. She did, however, enjoy the social dimensions of competing and being part of the club effort at carnivals. She enjoyed cheering on all her club mates and being part of the club effort. She did, however, enjoy patrolling most and it provided her with tangible and achievable personal goals and she wanted to be a professional lifeguard:

I've worked really hard to become a patroller and now that I have got that I've got other goals. I want to stay in the club long enough to get my IRB (Inflatable Rescue Boat) licence and become a lifeguard (Monte 2004).

Peter was in his second year of senior competition at the time of the study and after a disappointing first year had decided to commit himself to a more demanding training regime. This involved training every day all year round and attending interstate training camps. He was enjoying his improvement in competition but agreed that patrolling was more the more important aspect of club membership. As with Monte he liked the feeling of being part of a big team in competition and said that it 'gets you more involved in the club'. Despite his heightened enjoyment of competition he felt that patrolling was more important:

Comps (competitions) are really for yourself. It gets you into it but patrolling is probably more important because if someone gets into difficulty you're helping them and that's important (Peter 2004).

Emma was hoping to qualify for the national titles in Queensland and felt that being part of the club and contributing to it was very important. The competitive structure of surf carnivals and competing as 'one big team' intensified her identity with the club and strengthened relationships between members who competed: 'I think it's mainly your involvement in the club that is important rather than how good you are at anything'.

Gaining their SRC provided tangible markers of the progress of the four cadets toward fuller participation in the club. As Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest, participation in social practice provides more access to practices as 'learning resources'. Moving into assisting with patrols engaged them in master-apprentice type relationships with qualified lifesavers. While cadets can patrol from the age of thirteen they must work with fully qualified lifesavers. This is not only to ensure public safety but also forms part of the cadets' learning experience by placing them in a relationship through which they learn while performing the practice of patrolling. They learn while participating in authentic and meaningful practice. As 'Mark', a senior official, explained, the cadets are placed with lifesavers that will help them learn while patrolling:

We put them (cadets) with seniors who will teach them and not just sit them in the corner. We want the cadets working with seniors and learning the job. There's always got to be lifesavers with them for the legal and safety reasons. If not we find one in a hurry. But they're also there to teach the cadets the trade (Mark 2003).

Our four cadets had only recently begun patrolling at the time of the study and this acted as a marker of their movement toward full participants in the activities of the club. They all expressed a sense of pride in their roles as patrollers and enjoyed the

extra responsibility, their elevated standing in the club and the elevated social standing that the two local members in particular felt they had earned in the local community. Monte initially felt a little embarrassed when she saw locals she knew while on patrol duties in her distinctive red and yellow uniform. She did, however, feel deep pride: 'I think (being on patrol) is cool because it does show people that I am part of something and that I am doing stuff and that I have qualifications' (Monte 2004).

One of the most dominant themes to emerge from this study was the striking sense of identification with the club, the sense of belonging and the emphasis placed on working together for the good of the group. Both competing and patrolling formed important experiences for reinforcing this dimension of membership and in their development of identity. Although Peter was concentrating on competing he spoke with excitement about the sense of belonging and pride in being a lifesaver:

Oh look you get your life saving bronze or your SRC and you just want to be on patrol and you are around other people that you don't know and you make awesome relationships and friendships. It's good (Peter 2004).

Learning and development in the club was not restricted to that which occurred in structured practices as described above. It was an ongoing social process. Over years of membership in the club children were encouraged to view Ocean Village Surf Club as their second home. Several senior members told us that Ocean Village was a 'family values club' and that the club tried to make it a place where all members feel comfortable, secure and at home. There was a clear and articulated intention to make it an open and supportive community in which children, adolescents and adults were encouraged to interact. Emma, Monte, Peter and Lonny all described the club as a secure and supportive environment in which they could interact with a range of people their own age and of different ages. Monte said that,

I feel secure in this club. I know there are times when I am there with no one else my age and it can feel really weird but it can be good because it is a chance for me to talk to the older people (Monte 2004).

There was always something to do or someone to interact with at the club as Lonny indicates: 'It's good being in the club because everyone knows your name and when you're in Ocean Village there's always someone to hang around with and something to do' (Lonny 2004). Talking to people, playing and engaging in informal activities, such as surfing or going for a paddle on a surf ski, provide rich social interaction and participation in practice that moves children and young people toward full participation in the practices of the surf club.

The Ocean Village Surf Club was made up of a wide range of people that spanned generations. It provided social interaction both horizontally with people of the same age, and vertically with older people and younger children. The cadets in our study enjoyed making new friends in the club and mixing with their mates. They also valued the relationships they had with what Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to as the 'old timers' and the 'new comers' (young children) in the nippers as Peter confirms:

This year I made heaps of new friends like older groups and younger groups. Like you know if you teach a group they tend to just end up liking you and so that's cool (Peter 2004).

Such social interaction in the club, the opportunities for informal learning and the increasing access to the practices of the club provided our four cadets with valuable learning experiences that were highly relevant and meaningful for them. In addition to the skills and knowledge needed to perform in the practices of the club they learnt valuable social lessons. This was a constant theme in our discussions and interviews as is evident in Rocky's views on what children and young people can learn in the club:

It teaches them a fair amount of responsibility. It teaches them to read the surf and it teaches them general skills in life that are very helpful, just how to get along with people. You're always working in a group; you're always talking to people, learning first aid skills. You're learning surf knowledge. It's all about learning and having fun at the same time, which I think is really good (Rocky 2004).

## **Comparisons with school**

Over the summer during which we were at the Ocean Village Surf Club the focus of the four young people in our study was very much on the people, activities and tasks at the surf club. The beach was always busy, there were competitions to prepare for and the club buzzed every weekend. This was particularly noticeable during January when there was no school. However, once school had begun for the year they often commented on feeling disappointed that the season was drawing to a close. It was in interviews during this time that comparisons arose between the club and school. Although we did not focus on the school during the study and did not go into the participant's schools we explored references to school and comparisons made between school and the club. These offered useful insight into their membership in two significant communities of practice.

Each participant attended a different school. Lonny, Monte and Emma, enjoyed school and said that it was equally as important as the club. Emma and Lonny had their sights set on attending university and valued school in a different way to the club:

I don't think you can pick between (school and the club) because they are so different, they are both important in different ways. I want to go to Uni so my VCE's (Victorian Certificate of Education) are important, but what I do at the club is a community service and that's important. So I don't think I can choose (between them) (Lonny 2004).

Although her brother was at university Monte wanted to be a professional lifeguard. She did, however, feel she still needed a good education. Peter had also decided to become a professional lifeguard. He said that school was important but only as a means of entering TAFE (Technical and Further Education) to help qualify as a lifeguard:

Well they are both important but in different ways. You see I want to do well at school so I can go to study to be a lifeguard when I leave school. There is a course you can go on to at TAFE (Peter 2004).

School was, otherwise, largely irrelevant for him and did not engage him: 'Well school can be boring it's not boring here (at the club) there are always things to do and people to talk to' (Peter 2004).

Peter's comment on always having someone to talk to and things to do formed a common theme with all participants in our research at the club. In addition to patrols and competition the key informants in this study enjoyed doing anything related to the club. Peter said he was even happy to do painting and repair work at the club. When asked to compare the club to school all four quickly identified the fact that they chose to go to the club but had to go to school. When the second author asked Monte to identify the main difference between the surf club and school her response provided insight into differences in motivation for learning within two different contexts:

Well here I choose to come to the surf club and if I don't want to come or do a patrol I just say I don't and that's that. The only time you have to be here is to make up hours if you want to compete and since I don't do that then I can choose. But at school you have to go and they set you homework and the boring stuff.

**Interviewer:** But surely when you do the life saving awards you have to study?

Yes but then I really want to do that and the stuff is not overly difficult and they teach you everything and a lot of stuff is common knowledge so I didn't have to study much (Monte 2004).

Monte was not just referring to choice here but also to the relevance of what she was learning in the club to lifesaving and to her life outside the club. The learning at the club was not removed from authentic practice as it typically is at school. While students can participate in the practices of the school as a community of practice they do not usually connect with the outside community. Nor do they provide any increased access to practices of the adult world toward which students are moving. On the other hand, the relevance of what Monte had to study to gain qualifications at the club is so clear that it appears to her as common sense. Lonny in fact identified this immediate relevance of learning in the club setting:

What you learn or teach at the club you can see the relevance right then and there. It seems more practical if you see what I mean. But school is not the same because you can't always see the relevance or the point of what you learn. Not immediately any way (Lonny 2004).

As Monte suggested, they did not have to go to the club if they did not want to. But they did. To our knowledge not one of the participants missed a weekend, a patrol or a carnival that they had entered during the 2003/2004 season.

All key participants commented on the absence of 'rules' and of not being under surveillance when comparing the club to school. Monte said that she liked the absence of rules and that 'nobody ever judges you'. Although surf clubs are bound by a considerable number of rules in regard to the safety of their members and the public the key informants had no sense of rules being imposed upon them as they did at school. At the club they enjoy freedom of choice and a lack of overt rules yet, at the same time, are given far more responsibility than at school. Each summer they all have the responsibility of protecting or saving people's lives in the surf. As we outlined in the previous section, these young people had taken a big step in moving toward full participation in the practices of the club during the summer over which we were there. Over their time in the nippers program they had developed tangible knowledge, skills and understandings and had taken on increasing responsibility. As cadets, the four young people in the study had begun to teach nippers and pass on the knowledge that is necessary for the reproduction of communities of practice such as the surf club. In response to a question on differences between what she felt she

learned at school and at the club Emma highlighted the relevance, or usefulness, of what she learned, the social dimensions of membership, increasing responsibility and her position at the club:

I think we learn more useful stuff here at the club (than at school) and I enjoy the atmosphere and the people and there are no rules really. I guess I have responsibility here that I don't have at school, with nippers and cadets. It's more fun here and I don't have to come here if I don't want to (Emma 2004).

This sense of taking on responsibility and the position of improved standing and respect it afforded in the club extended to a sense of responsibility for 'the community'. For the two locals, Monte and Peter this seemed to mean the community of people who lived in the area more than the large numbers of beach-goers from Geelong, Melbourne and further away who flock to the beach over summer. There was, in fact, considerable reference to the concept of community by the four key informants. They saw the club as a community that served the local Ocean Village community and a larger community of people in general who go to the beach:

School is school. You have to be there and the club is more social. It's more of a community. I get different things from both (school and the club). School is important because I want to go to Uni, but the surf club is important because of the people and what we do, for the community (Emma 2004).

All four cadets drew attention to the lack of responsibility and position they felt they had at school when compared to the surf club. At the club cadets had responsibilities for such things as maintaining equipment and the club facilities, mentoring young children, teaching nippers groups, patrolling the beach and controlling crowds in the surf. The same young people who were charged with saving lives on a summer Sunday had comparatively little responsibility or position in the community of the school as Lonny suggests:

School and the club don't compare. It is two different places. At school I don't have as many responsibilities to others, just to myself. Whereas at the club I have responsibility to the club members, patrol groups and the public. It is totally different (Lonny 2004).

## Comparisons with sport clubs

Although we focus on the communities of the club and the participants' schools their engagement in sport placed them in other tangential and overlapping communities of practice. Their experiences in sport, within sport clubs and school, also offered informative comparisons with the community of practice of the surf club. Peter and Lonny played team sport in community-based sport clubs. Emma attended an elite independent school where sport was highly valued and very important for school status. She also played club sport over winter. Although Monte did PE at school she was not involved in any sport that was significant for her and made little reference to sport outside the surf club.

When asked to compare sport at school with competition in the surf club Emma pointed to the sense of community and belonging in the surf club:

At my school all they care about is win-win-win and this (the surf club) is more friendly. I would say that Ocean Village is more of a community. It's not just competing. There are a lot more aspects and you offer something to the community and it's more social ... My school belongs to the APA (elite independent schools sport competition) so all the teachers are worried about if we beat Wesley or Melbourne. Here it's not so much about the wining, and we are doing more than that with the patrols, it's a community service (Emma 2004).

Peter said he was 'into everything' to do with PE and sport at school and while not outstanding at any one sport described himself as a 'bit of an all rounder'. When comparing school sport to the club he said that the club was better organised and more supportive, '(At the surf club) there is always someone to help you or give you the time. That's one difference, and if you don't win it's not really a big deal'. He had played cricket in a local club but had given it up to concentrate on competition in the surf club but still played 'footy' with his mates over winter. He did not have many local friends who were in the surf club so footy gave him a chance to do something with locals. As his interest in the club grew he placed less importance on footy and said he was playing to keep fit for competition over winter, 'I belong to the local (Australian football) club as well, but really I only do it for the fitness. It's just something to do in the winter and my mates go'.

Lonny was far more involved in sport outside the club than the others and played hockey at state level. He was committed to hockey over winter and to the surf club over summer. The relatively short summer season meant that there was no conflict between these two activities. Despite the nature of hockey as a team game and the degree of communication, cooperation and other aspects of team work needed to

play at state level he was quick to suggest that there was far more team work involved in being in the surf club:

Hockey is a sport where the surf club is more than a sport. It involves more and is more important to other people, I play hockey and even though I play state and it is a team sport it is mainly for me...Even though you are in a team it's more about the individual, if that makes sense (Lonny 2004).

In this quote Lonny identified an important difference between sport and the surf club. Although there was a sporting side to the surf club with competition in surf carnivals and the training involved for the more committed competitors this was only one dimension of membership. The practice of patrolling is not a sport. As Monte and Lonny suggested to us, it is inclusive and anyone can succeed in becoming a lifesaver. Although Peter and Emma were concentrating on competition they also valued the non-competitive side of the club. Indeed, Peter had set his sights on becoming a professional lifeguard. Even at surf carnivals all four cadets suggested that it was not as competitive as other sport and that they felt they were always part of a big community. Although Monte was not a successful competitor she enjoyed 'being part of the team and cheering the others on'.

## **Discussion**

### **Distinguishing features of the surf club as a community of practice**

The sense of being part of a community and preparedness to take on responsibility as a member of it in three communities of practice examined in this paper for our four cadets was strongest in the surf club. A possible reason for this is that our participants had only experienced 'true' membership of a community of practice at the surf club. By true we are implying that there is a possibility at the surf club for members to engage in legitimate participation at every organisational level. This is demonstrated by the responsibility afforded to Lonny as mentor coordinator, the level of teamwork and striving for common goals during patrols and in the composition of the club's various committees. However, if we apply this principle of 'trueness' to schools and junior sports clubs we see that they are not necessarily 'true' communities of practice. That is to say they do not allow the majority of their members to move toward accessing the higher levels of the community. In fact, schools and sports clubs tend to operate distinct hierarchical structures. For example, a classroom might be described as a community of practice, but it is in effect two distinct communities of practice. This is because the students, while in the classroom community, will never reach the level of participation, or mastery, that the teacher demonstrates (Lemke 1997).

Despite the considerable responsibilities involved in legitimate participation in activities within the surf club community such as patrolling, teaching and mentoring, our participant's recognise a higher degree of freedom and choice at the club compared to school or the sport clubs with which they are involved. The system of volunteer patrolling in operation at the club offers an example of the flexibility afforded cadets and seniors. The traditional roster system, which had been in place at Ocean Village, had been replaced due to falling patrol numbers and the club had decided instead to allow members to volunteer for patrols. At the time of our study this had been very successful and had increased the number of lifesavers and cadets on patrol over the summer. Flexibility was also evident in the approach of the club to competition. While there was a sporting dimension to membership in the Ocean Village Surf Club (and others) the sole emphasis of the club was not on competing in carnivals and winning. Of the four cadets in this study two placed little importance on competing and, while they may be encouraged, young people in the Ocean Village Surf Club were not under pressure to enter surf carnivals. Certainly the better competitors in the club were strongly encouraged to enter carnivals but many did not compete at all. The prime drive for clubs with junior members is to reproduce the community of practice and its core concern is patrolling the beach. This represents a very significant difference between surf clubs and sport clubs that are essentially competitive.

It would seem that despite their conservative histories as bastions of the establishment (Booth 2001) surf clubs such as Ocean Village have begun to adapt to changes in Australian youth culture to maintain and promote membership levels in surf clubs. This ability to adapt to changing membership and changing circumstances is the key to innovation and evolution in a community of practice (Brown & Duguid 1991) and ensures the future of such clubs.

### **The complexity of learning**

This study provides useful insight into the complexity, multi-faceted nature, and significance of learning through practice. Conducted within a setting not normally considered as a significant site of learning in either the education or the physical education literature it draws attention to the important and meaningful learning and 'human growth' (Dewey 1916/97) that occurs outside schooling. Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 98) suggest that learning is a 'set of relations among persons, activity and world over time and in relation to tangential and overlapping communities of practice'. This study lends support to claims that learning needs to be recognised as a complex process located within particular social, cultural and institutional contexts (Davis & Sumara 1997, Davis, Sumara & Luce-Kepler 2000). The learning identified in this study occurs as an ongoing process linked to engagement in social practice and not restricted to formal schooling. Indeed, the experiences of the young people in this study suggest that the learning and human development that occurred through

membership in the surf club, in many ways, is deeper, more powerful and more meaningful than that which occurred at school. This learning also involves a process of becoming a member of the adult world. As they progressed through the age groups at the club young people were provided with increasing opportunities for decision-making, choice and the acceptance of responsibility. They were also increasingly involved with adults on more equal terms than at school or in their sports clubs. As Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989) suggest, people who learn skills actively build a deep understanding of the world in which they use those skills and through the continual development and use of those skills in that world they experience learning as a life long process.

### **Learning and identity**

Sport and the body can be pivotal in the formation of young identities (see, for example Connell 1983, Light & Quay 2003) but it was more the nature of engagement in a community of practice that formed such a powerful influence in this study. Long-term learning through membership in the Ocean Village Surf Club for the young people in this study is inextricably tied into the development of identity. As Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 52) suggest, 'learning involves the construction of identity'. Developing a sense of who I am arises from social relations and social interaction with other people. Being a person-in-the-world, or Heidegger's (1962) notion of 'being-in-the-world', involves always experiencing things in relation to other people and having relations with other people in some way. Identity is an ongoing, dynamic, reflexively monitored social process that shapes how we see ourselves in relation to others (Casey 1996). The four young people in this study constructed identity through relationships and bonds of shared values and meanings provided by membership in a community. This process is not fixed but is dynamically constructed through engagement in day-to-day social life. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) suggest that it is only through being in a society and the social relationships that this involves that we can form an identity and a sense of social distinction. Identities are 'long term living relations between persons and their places and participation in communities of practice' (Lave & Wenger 1991, p. 52).

The nature of learning that occurred through membership in the Ocean Village Surf Club provided far better opportunities for the ongoing development of identity than school appeared to. Deepening participation in relation to the socio-cultural community of the surf club and the engagement of the whole person involves the person in a process of 'becoming a certain kind of person' (Lave & Wenger 1991, p. 53). The learning that took place at the club was thus more than the mere acquisition of objective knowledge. Instead, it involved the whole person, in relation to a social community and holds transformative possibilities. The movement of Emma, Monte, Lonny and Peter toward becoming full, mature participants over time involved

significant growth and transformation. As Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest, changing knowledge, skill and discourse are all part of the development of identity.

## Conclusion

Comparing our participants' experiences of membership in the surf club with their reflections on their experiences at school and in sports clubs allows us to identify the distinctive nature of learning that took place at the surf club. It highlights learning at the surf club as an ongoing process of learning through participation in practice that was deeply situated in both social and physical contexts. It involved participation in an 'activity system' about which the young people in this study shared understandings concerning the activities they were involved in, what this meant for their community and what it meant in their lives (Lave & Wenger 1991, p. 98). Participation at the club involved more than learning technical skills and knowledge about 'reading the ocean' or paddling a rescue board. It involved an ongoing engagement of the whole person-in-the-world. It involved a way of being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1962, Merleau-Ponty 1962). As Heidegger (1962) argues, we cannot look at the world 'objectively' because the world is not, and cannot ever be, 'outside me' as I am in the world existing as part of it. From a similar perspective learning through practice within a community of practice such as the Ocean Village Surf Club involves learning as a whole person-in-the-world process. For the four young people at Ocean Village Surf Club experience and understanding work in constant interaction. Through legitimate participation in practice they, and their world, were tied into their actions, thoughts, speech and learning (Lave & Wenger 1991).

The young people in this study were not only approaching mature participation in the surf club as fully qualified lifesavers but were, at the same time, moving toward fuller and more mature participation in the adult world. Many of the skills and understandings developed in the surf club such as 'learning to get on with people', leadership and organisational skills are necessary to function successfully in adult society. The range of options, choices, autonomy and social interactions that characterised their membership in the club and the concomitant responsibilities accepted by them more resemble participation in the adult world than life at school or their membership in sports clubs did. In this way their membership in the surf club had more relevance to their lives and their life trajectories. At an age when many young people experience identity problems as they move into adulthood the surf club seemed to provide the four young people in this study with a sense of security, belonging, place and purpose not typically available in schools. The nature of long-term legitimate participation experienced by our four cadets provided opportunities for the development of identity and learning that was highly relevant to their surf club community and to their lives outside the club. It also engaged them in a form of

legitimate peripheral participation in the adult world in ways that no other community they are part of did.

In identifying the nature and significance of the learning that occurred in the surf club this study highlights the valuable contribution that surf clubs, and other communities of practice outside schools, can make to the development of young people as part of a life-long educational process. Such sites can offer learning opportunities not readily available in schools and, we suggest, may form important aspects of young people's learning, personal development and formation of identity. We close by suggesting that our understanding of education, in the broadest sense, and human growth for young people would be greatly enhanced through further research into the educational implications of membership in previously overlooked sites such as surf clubs.

## References

- Brawley, S. (1995) *Vigilant and Victorious: A Community History of the Collaroy Surf Life Saving Club 1911-1995*, Collaroy SLSC, Collaroy, NSW.
- Booth, D. (2001) *Australian Beach Cultures*, Frank Cass, London.
- Booth, D. (1994) Surfing 60s: A case study of the history of pleasure and discipline, *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 26, no. 103, pp. 262-279.
- Booth, D. & C. Tatz (2000) *One-eyed: A View of Australian Sport*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- Bourdieu, P. & L. Wacquant (1992) *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Polity, Oxford, UK.
- Brown, J. S., A. Collins & P. Duguid (1989) Situated cognition and the culture of learning, *Educational Researcher*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 32-42.
- Brown, J. S. & P. Duguid (1991) Organizational learning and communities of practice: Toward a unified view of working, learning and innovation, *Organization Science*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 40-57.
- Casey C. (1996) *Work, Self and Society*, Routledge, London.
- Connell, R. W. (1983) *Which Way is Up? Essays on Sex, Class and Culture*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- Davis, B. & J. Sumara (1997) Cognition, complexity and teacher education, *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 67, no. 1, pp. 105-125.
- Davis, B., J. Sumara & R. Luce-Kepler (2000) *Engaging Minds: Learning in a Complex World*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, New Jersey & London.
- Dewey, J. (1916/97) *Democracy in Education*, Free Press, New York.
- Glaser, B. & A. Strauss (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, Aldine, Chicago.
- Heidegger, M. (1962) *Being and Time* [trans. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson], SCM Press, London.
- Lave, J. & E. Wenger (1991) *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*,

- Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Light, R. & J. Quay (2003) Identity, physical capital and young men's experiences of soccer in school and community-based clubs, *Melbourne Studies in Education*, vol. 44, no. 2, pp. 89-108.
- Lemke, J. L. (1997) Cognition, context and learning: A social semiotic perspective, in D. Kirshner & J. A. Whitson, eds., *Situated Cognition: Social, Semiotic and Psychological Perspectives*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc, New Jersey, USA.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962) *Phenomenology of Perception*, [trans. C. Smith], Routledge, London.
- Patton, Q. M. (1980) *Qualitative Evaluation Methods*, Sage, London.
- Pearson, K. (1979) *Surfing Sub Cultures of Australia and New Zealand*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane.
- Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK & New York.