RESEARCH REPORT

Situated researcher reflections and professional learning journeys

Susanne Owen
School of Education, and Centre for Research in Education, Equity and Work
University of South Australia

Some key theoretical aspects of my recently completed Doctor of Education thesis regarding teacher professional development were situativity theory, communities of practice and being a situated reflective practitioner. With the hard work now over, it is interesting to comment on these aspects and their continuing relevance.

During the six years of part-time study, as a situated researcher working professionally in the educational community, I was really living these theoretical propositions, researching professional learning while situated, learning and collaborating within multiple

educational communities. This personal learning was reflected in the thesis itself, with the final research reports accompanied by my own journal reflections about the research journey. Sometimes, reflecting Van Manen (1977), this involved a sort of 'confessional style' of descriptive comment, but also over time I became increasingly skilled at adopting a more critical stance involving broader links to other literature and theoretical positions.

My individual perspective was also frequently challenged within the various situated learning communities of the academic, educational system and school worlds which were my life contexts. In the academic world, there was the apprenticeship process involving work and feedback with my supervisors, as well as academic conference attendance and presentations, online conference chatrooms and peer review processes. In the school community, I disseminated internet surveys within principals' associations, conducted coaching workshops and shared draft papers with school leadership teams and was provided with feedback. My professional work as an educational systems leader also provided opportunity for sharing relevant papers with colleagues in other managerial roles, and I had a sense of becoming an agent of change while also gaining other perspectives.

The situativity theory framework used for data analysis was also the basis of my situated researcher reflections. This involved acknowledging effective learning occurring through a process of collaboration with others, while engaged in a joint enterprise and sharing beliefs and relevant practical activities. And I connected with Lave and Wenger's (1991) communities of practice work, through ongoing formal and informal learning within those communities over an extended timeframe, with a sense of identity with the group developing and community responsibility for the learning of others.

In terms of joint enterprise, as a doctoral student I was really situated in the academic community as a newcomer, engaging in a range of experiences for the purpose of learning the written as well as

unwritten codes and practices of academia. From national conference participation to writing papers for journals and the long-term relationships formed with my supervisors, my identity as an academic slowly emerged although not without tensions arising from the duality of academic and educational practitioner roles. As Wenger (1988) outlines in regard to multiple overlapping communities, various positions are adopted, dependent on the group. As an experienced professional educator and leader accustomed to a relatively central location within that community, there were times when I found the academic apprenticeship process quite challenging and Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of legitimate peripheral participation and master-apprenticeship relationship certainly became evident.

But there was so much learning and my journal captures a significant moment when I was supported to become focused on the theoretical framework: 'Fresh from some workshopping of my teacher professional development topic with academic colleagues and a mentor, I've now distilled the essence of my work within situativity theory. What it's meant has been a key lens to analyse the research findings and the beginning of an explosion of creative energy and ideas and using the writing craft to re-examine and synthesise my learning' (Journal, April 2003).

Situativity theory also emphasises collaboration. A significant group for collaboration was my professional colleagues in the education system. In this environment, there was certainly the usual government bureaucracy and competing power blocs which Hargreaves (1992) has identified in other contexts as leading to a culture of 'balkanisation'. There were also some particular colleagues with whom I shared ideas and with whom I was learning informally on an almost daily basis. My journal captures some of the excitement I felt after visiting one of the case study schools and writing a paper which I shared with these particular colleagues: 'I was just buzzing, and I started fleshing out ideas about what education could look like

in the future … and a few days later I got everyone together to go out for coffee to give me some feedback!' (Journal, September 2003). In this strong collaborative and open community, I felt safe to share ideas and articles of interest in informal situations, to dream about new models for education, to review draft papers and to really engage in critical discourse and learning about pedagogy and professional development.

As a long-term school leader, the third community which was significant in my doctoral learning came from this group. Draft papers were used by some schools as practical artefacts to stimulate discussion about their own practices and their feedback was invaluable in my research journey.

And it was in this community that I experienced one of my greatest pleasures in conducting interviews of teachers and leaders within the case study schools. While there was a certain amount of tedium associated with eventually transcribing many lengthy interviews, I loved using the semi-structured approach, 'just letting people talk and then following up issues as they arose while presenting new topic questions from time to time to get their response' (Journal, March 2003). The richness of these data captured not only factual information but also the excitement of interviewees' professional development experiences in those moments of enlightenment. What I learned as an interviewer was the skill involved in listening to teacher responses and encouraging an in-depth reply while also deciding when to intervene and ask a follow-up question. And I felt very humbled at times when teachers, essentially unknown to me, opened up their hearts and minds and trusted my integrity in sometimes sharing deeply personal career experiences. While some teachers talked about career disappointment and there were significant recent school crises and associated staff demoralisation evident from some of the cases study schools, 'what came through strongly throughout from most of the teachers interviewed was a real commitment to

education and to kids and this was very uplifting' (Journal, September 2003).

Related to other aspects of situativity theory, throughout the doctoral research process and within the multiple communities of the academic, educational systems and schools, I was really grappling with a dominant professional identity. There was a strong sense of wanting to share my learning with others in these communities. Through engaging in research, preparing conference papers and presentations, writing for journals and practitioner publications and education consulting, I began to collaborate and to work towards making a difference for teacher and student learning.

With the goal of the formal doctoral qualification achieved, that process of collaborative professional learning and making a contribution is ongoing. No matter what the dominant pathway from here, it is certain to involve continued collaboration within multiple educational communities.

References

Hargreaves, A. & Fullan, M. (1992). *Understanding teacher development*, London: Cassell.

Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation,* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Van Manen, M. (1977). 'Linking ways of knowing with ways of being practical', *Curriculum Inquiry*, 6, pp. 205–228.

Wenger, E. (1998). 'Communities of practice. Learning as a social system', *Systems Thinker*, http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/lss.shtml

RESEARCH REPORT

An examination of the social systems of engineering projects

Errol Lawson
Systems Engineering and Evaluation Centre, and
Centre for Research in Education, Equity and Work
University of South Australia

My PhD thesis, titled "An examination of the social systems of engineering projects", was submitted in March 2005 and accepted by the University in August 2005. As can be inferred from the title, the research was transdisciplinary in that it drew from bodies of knowledge in domains of engineering, management, sociology, education and philosophy. My three supervisors were from both engineering (Systems Engineering and Evaluation Centre: SEEC) and education (Centre for Research in Education, Equity and Work: CREEW), and the examiners were from sociology and engineering.