Positions on Transitions: Conceptualising the progression from novice to expert researcher

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1. Background
Knowledge-based wealth generation, global economic competitiveness and social justice have led to an increasing emphasis on the value and importance of research conducted in higher education (HE) institutions (DFES 2003). However, within HE, research and the ways in which students and early career researchers view and experience research has received very little attention (Akerlind 2008).

Focusing specifically on the experience of the learning and teaching (L&T) researcher, this theoretically driven model considers the critical phases of transition in the course of an individual’s progression in research: undergraduate to postgraduate; postgraduate to newer researcher, and newer researcher to researcher producing knowledge within the wider disciplinary community. The model is underpinned by two key concepts. Firstly, that research can be viewed as a process that an individual must constantly come to terms with in the course of their academic career, and secondly, that the individual must be inducted into different communities of practice during particular transitional phases and states of liminality.

2. States of Transformation & Liminal Phases
The critical points which occur in the transition from novice to expert researcher represent more than career development milestones; they represent states of transformation (Savin-Baden 2008) that individuals encounter during their transition. The point here is that as the context of research changes so too does the researcher’s perception of its nature, meaning and purpose. For example, an individual might view their early research encounters as a series of distinct but interrelated activities with which they engage in for personal gain or as a means to develop knowledge that is new to them. However, as the researcher’s career progresses their perception of what counts as knowledge, who should benefit from it and how it should be generated and shared will often become more complex. Research becomes a way to understand or explain social phenomena. It is viewed as a continuous learning process which brings with it new experiences, unexpected challenges and feelings of uncertainty. Thus, the process of transformation involves the occupation of different liminal phases. These phases might be different for each researcher but will often ‘approximate to a kind of mimicry or lack of authenticity’ (Meyer and Land 2003: 10) that must be constantly negotiated and overcome.

3. Communities of Practice
The L&T researcher must become a participator in various communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) in the course of their career. Induction into these communities of practice occurs during phases of transformation and liminality. For example, when moving from the position of student to newer researcher an individual may find that a HEI institution, once familiar, becomes strange as they learn to operate as an employee within it. The progressing researcher also needs to learn the ‘rules’ of the wider education field - for example, the language of the discipline - and be abreast of its developments in order to make the transition to expert researcher who produces new knowledge. The latter ‘community of practice’ does not have a primary spatial location; however it may be intermittently located in conferences and other places of dissemination as the progressing researcher strives to have their work recognised by colleagues.

4. RIT: Easing the Process?
Meyer and Land (2003) argue that one way in which the position of liminality may be overcome is through participation. In the case of the L&T researcher, the progression of the novice individual may be eased by early (student) participation in research and early participation the ‘community of practice(s)’. One way this could be achieved within HEIs is through promotion of Research Informed Teaching (RIT), particularly the strands which involve students’ participation in research (Jenkins et al, 2007). This will not only develop a student’s research skills, but may be utilised as a way to induct students into the ‘community of practice’ of the discipline by allowing students to be seen as more equal partners in knowledge creation from an early stage in their career (Brew, 2003).

References