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Going Underground? Learning and Assessment in an Ambiguous Space[1]

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ABSTRACT This article offers three interrelated arguments for the adoption of a cultural approach to the study of learning. It then presents some early analyses of data from a case study of one learning site, concerned with the assessment of learning in the workplace. These analyses show how the shape of the learning site – for example, the nature of learning, the extent of opportunities for learning – is partly a product of the playing out of tutor disposition in relation to a field. Specifically, it is suggested that the absence of alignment between tutor disposition and the field within which her practices are located has resulted in ‘underground learning’, beyond the gaze of college processes. At the same time, all parties are dependent upon the success that is the end result of this underground learning. This scenario, in turn, presents difficulties for any conventional notion of ‘improvement’, and the discussion illustrates the power and the utility of a cultural approach for a deeper understanding of learning, with implications for both practice and policy.

Introduction

If we are serious about making the most of learning opportunities, including the idea of improving them, then we need very good information about what people currently do, why they do it and why they keep doing it. This seemingly simple argument is not heard very often in the further education sector (now part of the learning and skills sector) in England, where ‘quality’, ‘standards’ and ‘improvement’ tend to be seen as evidenced by data on retention and achievement; the combined results of inspections; a set of professional standards published by the Further Education National Training Organisation.

What sort of approach might allow a more subtle understanding to emerge? In this article, we begin by offering three linked arguments for adopting a cultural approach to the study of learning and we point to
some overlaps between them. We then present some early analyses of data from one case study. These show how the shape of the learning site – the nature of learning and the extent of opportunities for learning – can be understood as the playing out of tutor disposition in relation to a field. Learner disposition and other factors are also key to this process, although these are not addressed explicitly in this article. The discussion illustrates the power and the utility of a cultural approach for a deeper understanding of learning, with implications for both practice and policy.

The Broad Case for Culture in the Study of Learning

From the outset, the Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education (TLC) project [2] had a strong collectively-held view of the need to approach the study of learning culturally and a declared intention to develop the concept of learning culture to deepen our understanding of the FE context. At the same time, the project team wished to develop practical knowledge (Bloomer & James, 2003) and it put in place a design that relies upon practitioner engagement. The project seeks ultimately to ‘identify aspects of learning cultures that are amenable to intervention and change and to determine which types of intervention contribute to positive transformations in learning, and under what conditions they do so’ (Project Proposal, section 19).

For some writers, the term culture refers to an approach that deliberately crosses over and between academic disciplines (such as sociology and psychology). A powerful example of this ‘interdisciplinarity’ can be found in the work of James Wertsch, who has argued that if we wish to understand learning we must develop explanations that cross, link or disrupt disciplinary boundaries (Wertsch, 1998). Another argument, this time from the Cultural Studies field, suggests that a move away from disciplinary thinking amounts to a paradigm shift away from a naïve categorisation of things and processes in the world as either ‘normal’ or ‘pathological’ cases. Smith suggests that academic disciplines have been good at convincing people that the world is ultimately simple and regular, and that the categories they give us are ‘fixed inventories’ (Smith, 2000, p. 132). Whether or not we agree with this analysis, it does serve as a reminder that we can choose to put learning, as a set of practices to be understood, explained or transformed, at the centre of our work. Whereas, someone operating from more of a disciplinary position might begin with established classificatory practices – perhaps seeing a learning situation as symptomatic of particular cognitive styles, information processing, curriculum models or policy implementation.

Interdisciplinarity is one argument for taking a ‘cultural’ perspective to the study of learning. A second may be derived from the work of Pierre Bourdieu. While in one sense all of Bourdieu’s work concerns itself with
‘culture’ (Bourdieu, 1977, 1982; Grenfell & James, 1998; Robbins, 2000), specifically Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and field are important for what they might help us to do. Habitus ‘names the characteristic dispositions of the social subject. It is indicated in the bearing of the body and in deeply ingrained habits of behaviour, feeling, thought’ (Lovell, 2000, p. 27). Habitus engages with the field, which is conceptualised as a ‘structured system of social relations, at micro and macro level, rather like a field of forces in which positions are defined ... in relation to each other’ (James & Bloomer, 2001, p. 5). It is the dialectical nature of the relationship between habitus and field that helps the researcher to ‘avoid constructing reified “types” or “categories” in the way that much social science does (talking of “the adult learner”, “the mature student” or “the disaffected learner”), for example (James & Bloomer, 2001, p. 5).

There is a link here with Smith’s argument (see above). One of the effects of being informed by Bourdieu is that we are forced to question some fairly ingrained categories and distinctions. The most fundamental is that between ‘structure’ and ‘agency’. In the study of learning, some other key distinctions would include:

- that between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation;
- that between the conscious and the unconscious;
- the separation of knowledge, understanding and doing as separate domains.

A Bourdieuian approach encourages a certain scepticism about such distinctions – partly on the grounds that they may represent the interests of academic disciplines, and partly because their utility is diminished by concepts like habitus. For example, the conscious/unconscious distinction is of little use if we are using a concept of habitus, because a person’s habitus is both conscious and unconscious. It amounts to a durable, but flexible toolkit of dispositions that are the embodiment of socially-generated meanings and categories, which the person then contributes to maintaining.

Equally important, it is the relationship between habitus and field that offers a distinctive view of learning. This helps us to see how certain sets of assumptions prevail in certain learning situations, how they inform the practices of tutors, students, managers, employers and others, and how such practices, at the same time, contribute to the maintenance of a particular learning culture. The project also has a focus on the transformatory potential of existing learning cultures. This leads it to question whether, for example, conventional or institutional definitions of learning activity (such as those drawing on human capital ideas or which incorporate a technical-rational approach to decision-making) are articulated or adequate, and for whom. Getting a grasp of all this includes:
• finding out about such things as individuals’ backgrounds as well as their experiences and expectations;
• looking at the ingrained and changing practices of courses, institutions or subjects, and the way particular ‘modes of delivery’ operate.

It also involves making reasoned arguments about actual and potential transformations of people and practices, and a focus on the everyday more than on the exceptional. These things require an examination of the production of meanings, which is one common definition of culture.

A third argument for taking a cultural approach to learning comes from the analysis of the nature of learning itself. As is now quite well-known, Jean Lave & Etienne Wenger’s (1991) landmark book, Situated Learning – legitimate peripheral participation, offers a social theory of learning which sees learning as a process of social participation rather than as the acquisition of knowledge by individuals:

A person’s intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a socio-cultural practice. This social process, includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29)

As Smith has put it, ‘there is a concern with identity, with learning to speak, act and improvise in ways that make sense in the community ... in contrast with learning as internalisation, “learning as increasing participation in communities of practice concerns the whole person acting upon the world” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 49)’ (Smith, 2003, p. 4).

Lave & Wenger’s treatment of agency and constraint is quite close to Bourdieu’s. There is an insistence that ‘Living meaningfully implies ... an active process of producing meaning that is both dynamic and historical’ and ‘Meaning exists neither in us, nor in the world, but in the dynamic relation of living in the world’ (Wenger, 1998, pp. 53 and 54. Emphasis added). Similarly, ‘[P]articipation in social communities shapes our experience, and it also shapes those communities; the transformative potential goes both ways’ (pp. 56-57). This begs the question of why it is that we have got so used to thinking that we must isolate causal variables and that they must in the end amount to either individual differences or determining structures. For Wenger, participation is partnered by the relational concept of reification, which is the necessary process of making cultural things – the tools, concepts and objects that accompany practice/participation:

participation and reification are both distinct and complementary ... [t]he reification of a Constitution is just a form; it is not equivalent to a citizenry. Yet it is empty without the participation of the citizens involved. Conversely, the
production of such a reification is crucial to the kind of negotiation that is necessary for them to act as citizens. (p. 62)

The work of Lave, Wenger and collaborators is helpful on a number of fronts, including the powerful idea that transformation is cultural – that is, it is both a personal and a situational or structural process. The title of our research project (Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education) is intended to reflect just such a double meaning. Lave & Wenger’s work also reminds us that some of the most pervasive and widely-held characterisations of learning may actually reflect ossified institutional conveniences or ideological tram-lines in our thinking, rather than being necessarily useful for understanding. Let us be in no doubt about the relevance of this for the task in hand. In FE, as in other sectors, there are some strong and collective views about good and bad practice that rest on popular dichotomies more than they do on research evidence or even professional experience. As Bourdieu reminds us, the pre-constructed is everywhere, and it is important to think relationally and to ask ‘what interests are served by this or that practice’?

Learning Culture in a Learning Site

On the face of it, if we wish to explore the utility of learning culture as a conceptual tool it would seem safest to take a group of learners who spend a lot of time together on a course with a strong vocational identity. Indeed, this is already the core concern of some of the TLC cross-project work, which looks at processes, such as vocational becoming or the creation of vocational habitus, paying particular attention to gender dimensions (see Colley et al, this collection). However, here we wish to introduce one of the learning sites in the project that is quite far removed from this picture, in that it involves a tutor and a number of isolated individuals. The methodological subtext here is to see how useful a notion of learning culture might be for developing an understanding in less favourable circumstances.

The learning site in question is part of the provision of a large city-based college of further education in England to which we have given the pseudonym Riverside College. Rather than being a course, it is ostensibly a series of assessment activities. It comprises work-based assessment for National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). These qualifications were introduced following a review of vocational qualifications in 1986 in England and Wales, which had pointed to duplication, gaps in provision, barriers to access, unclear routes for progression, an over-reliance on knowledge rather than skill-testing and limited take-up. The process was overseen by a new body called the National Council for Vocational Qualifications, who developed a framework of five levels and eleven
occupational areas (see, for example, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [QCA], 2003). The new qualifications would offer:

- a competence-based assessment approach derived from functional task analysis of actual work roles, and therefore greater relevance to the needs of individuals and employers;
- a more coherent framework, with clear levels and fewer disparate qualifications;
- a break with ‘time-serving’ by learners on courses, allowing assessment when ready.

These features figured prominently in the publicity surrounding the launch of NVQs. However, we would want to add that the introduction of the qualifications carried three further implications:

- the assertion of a hierarchy of capability, in which the management of people in an occupation is given the status of a higher level competence on the same scale as the knowledge and skills of the job itself;
- the assumption that performance against competencies would always be a sufficient proxy for knowledge and understanding (this feature, the most criticised aspect of NVQs, eventually changed with the explicit measurement of ‘underpinning knowledge’);
- the conceptualisation of vocational learning and assessment as two separate realms of activity.

The introduction of competence-based assessment was a highly controversial issue and the subject of fierce debate, especially around its reduction of vocational knowledge, understanding and skill to ‘performance’ (Eraut, 1994), also widely seen as an expression of behaviourism (see, for example, Hyland, 1994, 1997; also Armitage, 2003). For many observers, fundamental difficulties remain. A recent analysis helpsfully distinguishes between problems attendant upon the use of competence-based assessment (to which there can be both ethical and democratic objections), and on the other hand, an inherent lack of coherence owing to a reliance upon epistemologically competing assumptions (Tarrant, 2000). However, in the context of the present discussion, it is the last feature in our list above that appears the most significant. The conceptual separation of learning and assessment opened the way to assessing workplace competence wherever it might be found, so that individuals could be assessed on what they could already do without having to do a course of study. This permitted the emergence of competition in the assessment of competence across a wide range of occupations, not least between public and private sector organisations. As in other sectors of education, a strong political drive towards marketisation had made itself felt in this period.
Despite the critique, NVQs survived and continued to grow, gaining a measure of acceptance by both employers and employees. By early 2001 some 3.2 million NVQ certificates had been awarded ... it is estimated that around 12% of the national workforce have attained an NVQ (QCA, 2003). This growth is reflected in Riverside College: in 1996, around 40 people began programmes of NVQ work-based assessment, whereas currently there are between 500 and 600 enrolments, with the college aiming to double those in the near future. The potential profitability of the work means that NVQ assessment continues to be a highly competitive field. At Riverside College managers find themselves competing with private providers. There is also a surprising degree of internal competition at the overlap of different faculties’ work. For example, there were stories in circulation about how two people from the College had visited the same company on two different days and tried to sell a similar NVQ assessment service at two different prices. Prompted by the need for a more harmonised response (in the form of a 3-year plan to meet the agenda of the government policy document Success for All), senior managers were actively trying to bring about convergence and, as one explained, ‘companies outside want to deal with a one-stop shop’.

In one of the largest faculties in the college, the Faculty of Administration, Business and Technology, NVQ provision is offered in the fields of: Business Administration; Customer Service; Using IT; and Call Handling Operations. Most of the learners, referred to as ‘candidates’ by the college teaching team, remain in their workplace whilst signed up. Although there are opportunities for them to attend college-based workshops as well, very few of these are taken up. The college is physically and mentally remote, and the learner’s contact with the college is via Gwen, the tutor who comes into their workplace to assess them. (Gwen is also actively involved in the Transforming Learning Cultures project as one of the ‘participating tutors’.) Several of the learners separately told us that for them ‘Gwen is the college’, and this phrase was also used, independently, by Gwen’s line manager. The provision, which ranges from Level 2 to 4 in the NVQ framework, is planned on 6-12-month periods, with scope for extension where necessary.

The learners tend to be located in large public and private organisations in the immediate region (including a local authority, a building society, part of a civil service department, a higher education institution, and an information technology manufacturing company) and the provision is negotiated as a ‘package’ with these organisations. There is a formal agreement between the college and the organisation with regard to financial arrangements. A minority of learners fund themselves. A programme of study will typically begin with a tutor-led induction session followed by a series of one-to-one meetings between the tutor and each candidate, spread over the 6-12 months. One-to-one meetings will typically last 60-75 minutes, will begin with tea or coffee, and an informal
chat, followed by a review of tasks carried out since the last meeting and a preliminary tutor judgement about their suitability, then a conversation about how various work practices could be identified and described so as to provide evidence for further elements of competence, and an agreement about what to do next.

At the time of writing, each student ‘generates’ 10 hours of tutor work, although according to both Gwen and her line manager, in reality the amount of work is often far greater, particularly at level 2. (Towards the end of the 2001-2002 academic year, dramatic reductions in contact time were being discussed in the College – more on this below). Typically, each day Gwen meets up with several learners in different organisations in the area, visiting them at their desks or in a nearby room within the workplace. There is wide variety in their ages, though most are in their 20s. Their educational and employment backgrounds also vary greatly. Completion rates are above 90%, in contrast to other work-based learning programmes, including the Modern Apprenticeship schemes, whose completion rates are often considerably lower.

One of the first things to strike us was an apparent fault-line in the interview data around how to describe activity. On the one hand, a line manager, college documentation (and, indeed, some learners’ accounts) described the activity as one of assessment only. That is, the process here appeared to consist of a candidate and a tutor, acting as an assessor, working together to identify and record examples, incidents or episodes that demonstrated competence in accordance with a specification. This ‘official’ description is what we expected and we were not surprised to find it augmented by practices that would maximise its reach. For example, the tutor would put considerable effort into explaining the language of the assessment tools, and would even provide a tape-recorder so that candidates who found it especially difficult to write about some aspect of their work would still be able to record experiences that demonstrated competence.

However, increasingly, it became clear that the tutor was working in a range of ways that took her well beyond the official definition of the work. Her regular activity included all of the following:

- **Close working relationships** – at times indistinguishable from counselling, that would reduce the perceived threat of the qualification. As Gwen says, ‘the relationship is usually very friendly because you’ve got to get their confidence and their attention right away, and because people are very frightened of NVQ’.
- **Teaching** – short episodes of ‘teaching’ and the provision of extra materials ‘[even though] you’re supposed to just assess them’.
- **Negotiating learning opportunities** – with line managers and other colleagues of the learner. Examples would be arranging for a learner to chair a meeting where normally their role did not allow it, or devising
new tasks that were compatible with other work practices, but which would not arise in the normal work role.

- **Unconditional personal support** – wherein the tutor passed on her home telephone number and made it plain that she was ready to help the learner to solve a variety of problems related to the completion of units.

- **Critical moments of intervention** with learners, but also with employers or their representatives. Two occasions in particular were about learners as employees who had weaknesses in the employer’s view and/or were at risk of losing their jobs.

- **Forward planning with learners**: this is something that Gwen has continued to stress, whilst accepting, on the one hand, that the NVQ ‘is only supposed to be appraising somebody for what they can do now. But on the other hand ... I would want it to be a bit more than that ... some kind of development through the thing’.

None of these tasks was part of the official picture of the work, yet arguably (and as, indeed, argued by the tutor and some learners), they were all at various times fundamental to the learners’ success in gaining the qualifications. In its simplest characterisation, the learning process here consists of helping the learner to reinterpret aspects of their everyday action that can be made to constitute evidence for a level of competence. Rachel, who works in a social services department and is registered for level 2 Business Administration, spoke for many of the learners when she talked of a regular experience of discovering, during Gwen’s visits to her, that what she thought was complex and beyond her experience was actually ‘staring me in the face’. In the learners’ accounts, learning in this site often appears to be about the re-articulation (in new, less familiar terms) of workplace doxa, or what is regarded by individual workers as too everyday to be worth noticing. In Wenger’s terms, it is a supported act of reification, ‘the process of giving form to our experience’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 58). We might also term this a process of consecration: it is largely a positive experience for learners and seems closely linked to their descriptions of rising confidence that so often accompanies the pursuit of an NVQ for these individuals.

At the time of our second round of tutor interviews (June 2002), Gwen and her peers felt considerable strain with the news that, in order to remain competitive, the costs associated with NVQs would have to be reduced further. The ‘10 hours per candidate per level’ (which as we have seen was supplemented by Gwen with a great deal of her own time), looked likely to be reduced. There appeared to be three strategies for achieving this, all under active development by college management. The first was to redefine the worker, by creating a new category of staff, which Gwen referred to as ‘pure assessors’. These would have experience in the appropriate field and have the requisite ‘D’ qualifications (shorthand for
the specialised NVQs devised for assessors and verifiers), but would receive far less remuneration than a main grade lecturer.

The second strategy was to run distance-learning programmes, which would give students access to learning materials, ranging from introductory materials to NVQ training resources, via the internet. Gwen went to some trouble to plan and submit a proposal to see if one of the qualifications could be adapted to such a strategy; however, the scheme appeared to be ‘put on hold’, whilst a third strategy was developed.

This third strategy was to purchase a computer-based package that would provide a means to record, store and monitor progress with greater efficiency, using digital audio and video recordings of the evidence towards units. Gwen had explained how administration and record-keeping were ‘incredibly time-consuming for NVQ assessors’. Despite huge start-up costs, the system’s potential to reduce assessor-time and bring about a major reduction in recurrent costs was a major incentive for the line manager. She suggested that a candidate might be helped to gain level 2, 3 and 4 qualifications on a total of about 10 hours of staff (assessor) time. She also went on to describe how the system would do away with the need for students and tutors to monitor progress with cumbersome paper records. Gwen commented that the ‘paperless recording system’ was introduced to staff as ‘being able to do everything except make the tea – make assessment decisions, record and track all evidence, contact hours, discussions and more’. However, she was concerned that, like the proposal to use distance learning materials, such strategies could be detrimental to the learning of some students: ‘My fears are that often you are dealing with people who are under-confident ... we will lose the very things that make us successful’, namely the personal interaction between the tutor and the students.

Despite her own misgivings, Gwen had spent several months in piloting this system with a small group of NVQ Call Handling candidates – with mixed results to date. Some of her concerns about the lack of interaction were borne out, with one learner asking to be withdrawn and returned to the previous ‘paper’ system. Finally, Gwen found herself in a position where she was ‘betwixt and between’ the two systems, saying ‘I physically can’t do it ... I’m almost getting to the point now where I’d rather everybody was on one system or the other’.

Gwen also felt that with the new paperless recording system, face-to-face meetings with students and tutors would no longer take place, and learners would be left with no record of their ongoing achievement since their portfolio would be kept electronically by the tutor and only accessible by her. ‘A reservation I have is that the candidate will not feel that they have much ownership/input into their own NVQ. They will have no portfolio to look through, no records except what we choose to print out for them, no hard copy of action plans necessarily. Will they really feel they are doing a course? Will they feel in control of their own NVQ?’
Students’ sense of ownership and control may diminish. Furthermore, what we term ‘underground learning’ – which is a set of practices that we suggest inhabits a significant place in this learning site – could also be threatened.

**The Maintenance of Underground Learning**

Gwen’s comment (‘will they really feel they are doing a course?’) is very telling. It is a reminder that her actions as a tutor are informed by much more than the design of NVQs; what it says in her job description, what her line manager asks her to do or what is agreed verbally about the job. There also appear to be powerful dispositional and situational elements at work here. Gwen’s personal and professional history includes a painful period in selective secondary education (painful in terms of the pedagogy and much of the subject content) and a later period in a further education college, positively regarded by her, where she studied on a secretarial skills course. She began her career in FE by teaching on part-time computer courses. Most recently, her completion of a part-time degree and her pursuit of a part-time higher degree are partially motivated by a desire to move from further education into higher education teaching. Her mother talks, half-jokingly according to Gwen, about her having ‘risen above her station in life’.

Gwen refers to some recent groups of her students as ‘my little babies’ and also talks of ‘saving’ people via educational activity. She often describes the lengths she will go to reduce anxiety amongst her students, and we have seen the list of activities that are evidenced in the data. Gwen could be described as a humanistic practitioner who is constantly caught out by the amount of time it takes to do everything deemed necessary. A recurring theme is the near impossibility of fitting her 0.5 job into 3 of the 5 weekdays and, although she has ‘crisis meetings’ with her line manager to try to achieve a more sustainable balance, she continues to work for longer than her contracted hours. She readily admits that, time and again, her selflessness jeopardises the time she has set aside for completing her own part-time higher degree.

The challenge here is to understand the disjuncture between the rhetoric and reality of Gwen’s work. To do so, we may need to go back to the pivotal shift in the vocational education field that marked the introduction of competence-based assessment – namely, a process and a technology of assessment that was designed to put employers back in control of the curriculum and to drive up quality through the use of market mechanisms. The disaggregation of learning and assessment in NVQs competence-based assessment allows a commodification of the latter, and in turn allows the use of indicators to compare providers, regions and nations (e.g. National Education and Training Targets in England, which are taken by some to be key indicators in a ‘learning
society’ suitable for a ‘knowledge economy’). This fundamental shift in the landscape of vocational education changed what it was possible to do, closing some spaces and opening up others.

One rationalist view might be that Gwen needs to wake up to the fact that she is in a process of self-inflicted exploitation and that she should ‘wise up or get out’, but this rather conveniently positions Gwen herself as the unit of analysis and, therefore, the ‘problem’. A cultural view might instead seek a relational understanding of social practices. This suggests that the close affinity between Gwen’s educational history and her current ‘way of being’ or habitus could be key. The data suggests that when confronted by people who want to learn (or even just maximise their chances of assembling a sufficient body of evidence about what they know and can do), Gwen finds it impossible to pretend that she is just an assessor. This is, however, precisely why she is so successful and highly regarded by everyone concerned (not least the learners). Yet this is a radical suggestion, because the separation of learning and assessment has become part of common-sense thinking and for many people, including many practitioners, now goes without saying. With her ‘old-style’ habitus, Gwen is uncomfortable in a field that no longer officially recognises what she does (and, in a strong sense, what she is). She mediates and mitigates the effects of the official separation of learning and assessment by taking learning ‘underground’. However, this is a difficult option and she bears the costs of doing so (emotional as well as material) by herself.

There are resonances here with other tutors in different learning sites across the Project. For example, Ruth, who is the tutor for an ESOL (English for Speakers of other Languages) programme, describes how she and her colleagues regularly help their students over and above what they are technically committed to doing by, as she puts it, going ‘the extra mile’. Having done so, she finds that the personal cost has been substantial and she has consciously resolved to draw up tighter boundaries in order to protect herself in future. Another tutor, who runs a vocational nursery nursing course, finds that her ‘deep commitment’ to her students only serves to increase the level of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) that she engages in. In these and other cases, it is apparent that tutor habitus, including notions of professionalism, is a great deal more than sets of attitudes or preferences. Deep-rooted dispositional factors are at stake, and these become visible through the extent of their dissonance or congruence with the changing field.

However, to return to Gwen specifically, our data and early analysis suggests that it is helpful to point to the relationships between (first) a personal and professional history and associated dispositions, (secondly) Gwen’s interpretation of the job and (thirdly) her practices. The practices described both flow from and reproduce the dispositional aspects mentioned. For one thing, the practices are valued highly and directly by
learners, and play a large part in their desire to complete the assessment process. The ‘fault line’ mentioned earlier begins to make more sense, in that Gwen and her students are engaged in practices that are not within the official remit of the work (and, therefore, not resourced, nor subject to institutional quality mechanisms), but upon which its success largely depends: the assessment activity rests on the ‘underground’ maintenance of practices that explicitly address learning. There are some similarities with the work of her colleagues. Yet whilst Gwen’s line manager describes her as ‘quite typical of the NVQ assessment team’ with regard to her working practices (e.g. she is ‘very hard working and can be relied upon’, has expertise, enthusiasm and is successful with achieving college targets), there is, perhaps unsurprisingly, no explicit recognition of her typicality in relation to her activities with learning and teaching that we have been describing.

On a related issue, Gwen described the ‘huge variety’ in the support that the learners enjoyed from their employers. The continuum ranges from a total ignoring of the student’s NVQ activity in the workplace, through to high levels of support. An example of the latter would be Elizabeth, who works as a components buyer for an international information technology manufacturer. She is registered on a level 3 ‘Using Information Technology’ qualification, and came to it having previously completed a higher level NVQ (level 4) in Business Administration. This prior experience, together with her current employer’s staff development policy, appears to have put her in a position to make certain demands and she negotiated an arrangement in which the company supplied a mentor, with whom she met regularly to discuss her progress on the NVQ. It also so happens that because of the nature of the organisation, she is surrounded by colleagues who represent an especially rich concentration of information technology expertise who she can also ask for advice on matters relating to the NVQ and has ‘never been turned down’.

There is, of course, a range of types and levels of support between these two extremes. The important point here is that it is effectively a matter of chance as to whether any given student finds him or herself in a situation where they can access support. No arrangements for support for learning are specified in the agreement between the college and the employer, because the relationship is officially conceived as limited to the costs of the assessment of competence in a workplace setting. This worries Gwen, but is not something that is easily addressed. A student would not be in a position to complain about something that does not, officially, exist. From a college point of view, there are interesting questions too about systems for monitoring quality that cannot reach out to cover learning activity that is effectively ‘underground’.

A related question asks to what extent the NVQ process, for all its individualisation via the notion of competence, taps meaningfully into
workplace learning in the wider sense? Workplaces, functioning as communities of practice, contain social processes of learning. There is a ‘collective construction of local practice that, among other things, makes it possible to meet the demands of the institution’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 46). As an outsider, the tutor must form a close relationship (and gain a close familiarity with the workplace) if they are not to be excluded from this collective construction of local practice. As Wenger’s own fieldwork illustrates, the practices in question may be somewhat at odds with orthodox or officially-sanctioned reifications. NVQs are official reifications par excellence, consisting of outcome-based specifications derived from functional task analysis, endorsed by groups within which employer interests are paramount and expressed in individualistic terms. This, in turn, suggests that there is likely to be only limited ‘fit’ between an NVQ and the workplace as a community of practice; questioning the widespread assumption that work-based assessment using NVQs provides automatic workplace relevance.

Conclusion

We have suggested that there are a number of linked justifications for taking a cultural approach to the study of learning, derived from interdisciplinarity, Bourdieu’s social theory and the work of Lave and Wenger. Having examined a particular case with reference to these ideas, we have found that a cultural approach to learning offers subtle and contextualised insight. In addition, it helps us to appreciate the underlying complexity of ‘what people currently do, why they do it and why they keep doing it’.

For the learners, much that goes on in the learning site is indeed transforming in a generally positive sense. Still, it is worth asking the more difficult question as to what ‘improvement’ might look like in the site. For example, would it be better for all concerned if the extensive learning activities were made visible, properly resourced, recognised? This would immediately push up costs. In the highly competitive world of work-based assessment this would drive the ‘business’ elsewhere and it would simply cease to be part of what the college does. A number of staff redundancies and non-renewal of temporary contracts would surely follow, and the statistics for the successful completion of NVQs might take a downward turn. It would seem difficult to describe any of these consequences as ‘improvements’. Similarly, any proposals for change at the level of the institution must recognise that the college is, itself, located in a field in relation to other interests and positions, and the recent history of struggles in that field have redefined both the work and the terms of engagement in it. As Young (1998) argued, and as Boreham (2002) demonstrated convincingly when discussing the recent major United Kingdom Government U-turn regarding the reinstatement of
'taught knowledge and understanding' in NVQ/SVQ, the vocational curriculum is a product of relations of power – in other words, there is a field in place – as well as being the realisation of the meanings brought to (or created within) a particular course, classroom or workplace by individuals like Gwen, her line manager and her students. Attempts to change policy and practice that ignore this are likely to have, at best, limited impact.

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Notes
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References


