‘We all know why we’re here’: learning as a community of practice on Access to HE courses

Nalita James, Vaughan Centre for Lifelong Learning, University of Leicester
*Hugh Busher, School of Education, University of Leicester
Beth Suttill, School of Management, University of Leicester

*Corresponding Author

Author Information:
Nalita James, Vaughan Centre for Life Long Learning, 128 Regent Road, University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH, UK. T: 07821722432, E: nrj7@le.ac.uk
Hugh Busher, School of Education, University of Leicester, 21 University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RF, UK. T: +441162623664; E: hugh.busher@le.ac.uk
Beth Suttill, School of Management, University of Leicester, Ken Edwards Building, University Road, Leicester, LE17RH, UK E: BS110@le.ac.uk

Authors’ brief biographies
Hugh Busher is senior lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Leicester. His research interests lie in: people, power and culture & the development of communities in educational institutions; the interaction of policy and socio-economic contexts with the internal processes of educational institutions and the people in them; the development of students’ and teachers’ voices and their construction of identities in particular policy and socio-economic contexts.

Nalita James
Nalita James is senior lecturer in the Vaughan Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Leicester. Her research interests lie in the sociology of education and include: higher education; transitions from school to university and from education to work; changing patterns of education, work and identity; lifelong learning; and education policy.

Beth Suttill is a PhD student in the School of Management, University of Leicester, and a former intern on the Opening Doors project on students’ identities as learners on Access to HE courses.
Abstract

This article examines the extent to which Access to HE courses can be defined as communities of practice. Other studies have already revealed the importance of mutual engagement and supportive relationships between students, and students and tutors in facilitating learning. While previous studies carried out on Access to HE (AHE) courses in England and Wales have largely focused on single colleges, the study that this article draws on was carried out in three urban Further Education (FE) Colleges using a linked case studies design and a social interactivist lens. It investigated mature students’ perspectives of their changing learning identities through their developing relationships with their tutors and with each other during their AHE courses. Qualitative data was collected from five to six self-selecting AHE students in each College using focus group interviews and from their tutors using individual interviews. The findings suggest that the AHE students in this study generally participated and interacted in a supportive and collaborative way, guided by their tutors, and how and why they did this. This mutual engagement around particular core values helped to construct communities of practice although some students remained peripheral participants. Within these communities were considerable inequalities of power, largely sustained by the institutional structures and professional discourses within which the AHE courses were located.

Key Words
Access to HE courses, learning community, power, adult learners, further education

Introduction: Access to HE – A shifting context

Access to Higher Education (AHE) is a one-year diploma qualification which is designed to prepare adult learners (aged 19+) for study at university and is aimed at those ‘excluded, delayed or otherwise deterred by a need to qualify for (university) entry in more conventional ways’ (Parry 1996, 11). The first Access courses were established in the 1970s mainly to encourage entry to teacher training by people from a wide range of social backgrounds. In 1987 AHE courses were recognised as an alternative route for entry to HE in addition to more conventional ‘A’ level routes (Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) 2012). In England and Wales, about 40,000 adults register on QAA-recognised AHE programmes each year of whom about 20,000 enter Higher Education Institutions (HEI) (QAA, ibid.).

AHE courses have underpinned consecutive British governments’ aims to redress educational exclusion among adult learners, widen participation in higher education, although this does not happen evenly across all HEI, and promote social inclusion (QAA 2010). The courses attempt to redress the balance of educational disadvantage (Jones, 2006, 485) and help to attract ‘second chance’ learners into Further Education (FE). AHE students who are mature applicants are seen as crucial by some HEI for meeting the widening participation targets set by central government and which attract additional funding (Hinsliff-Smith 2010). However, the current (2014) British government emphasises the importance and value of education for developing an economy centred on knowledge and skills (BIS 2010,
It has prioritised the involvement of young people under 24 years old, in part to lessen the impact of high youth unemployment, rather than ensuring increased participation by those groups of people who are currently under-represented in higher education. This is portrayed in government discourses as ‘fair access’ to higher education which ensures ‘that all those with the ability have access to higher education’ (BIS 2012, 4). The policy has drawn significant criticism from groups involved with work based, vocational and adult education who have argued that broader participation should be about providing second and third educational opportunities for adult learners who have been unable to benefit from the school system (Fenge, 2011).

The policy has been supported by significant changes to the FE funding system for students (BIS 2010). Now, only young adults aged 19-24 years undertaking their first full level 2 or level 3 qualification (equivalent to ‘A’ level in England) will be fully funded. For older (mature) students aged 24 years or over who wish to undertake level 3 courses, such as Access to HE courses, or higher qualifications there will only be government backed loans (BIS 2010, 7) unless the students choose to pay in full in advance.

AHE courses, often regarded as the “Cinderella of the education system” (Franklin 2006, 1), are largely taught within the context of the FE sector in England and Wales, itself often perceived as having a ‘historical Cinderella like image’ (James and Biesta 2007, 9). These colleges are ‘commonly regarded as at the centre of providing opportunities for lifelong learning, and a means of promoting economic growth and social cohesion’ (Jephcote et al 2008, 164) and are often perceived as a ‘last chance saloon’ for people who have under-achieved previously in education. Access to HE courses fit in well with this perspective. The study of Warmington (2002) highlighted the creation of a collective identity for AHE students around a celebration of the idea of maturity. In that study, work-friendship groups served as a mechanism that mitigated against non-completion. Supportive learning cultures were also an important counteracting force to social disadvantages felt by black minority ethnic students studying on AHE courses (Dillon 2010).

Access to HE courses act as a site of transition between the students’ current position (present identities) and their future position (identity trajectories) (O’Donnell and Tobbell 2007). How AHE courses are run can support the complex demands that AHE students have for learning. However, there are very few studies that have examined these issues in any great depth in relation to these students’ learners’ identities and transitions to HE, although there is a literature that has examined the concept of learner identities and participation in adult learning, and adult learners’ transitions to HE (O’Donnell and Tobbell 2007; Cieslik 2006; Crossan et al 2003).

Many AHE students face considerable tensions in balancing the different demands in their lives of supporting families, earning sufficient wages to live and undertaking a strenuous course of study which, in about nine months, brings their level of knowledge to what is claimed to be the equivalent of a two year ‘A’ level course. Faced with these tensions, AHE students appear to study most effectively when they feel tutors and colleges are providing strong emotional and academic support (Jones 2006; Dillon 2010). Students perceive supportive relationships as contributing significantly to individual success because they help to build confidence (Crossan et
Tutors construct these supportive relationships, whether for Access to HE students or other adult learners (Crowther, Maclachan, and Tett 2010; Scanlon 2009; Jones 2006), by being available, approachable and able to understand students' various situations and needs.

However, external influences over Access to HE courses, in part through QAA regulation, and in part through shifting educational policy and the emergence of a performative culture for FE colleges, has shifted the emphasis in AHE tutors’ roles toward that of being managers and monitors of student performance, evidence for which is presented below as well as in Towler, Woolner, and Wall (2011) and Busher, James, and Piela (2014). The increased emphasis on student learning targets and accountability by FE colleges and recent alterations to the nature of AHE courses’ curriculum, entry requirements and assessment processes, such as the introduction of grading, have driven this trend.

To make sense of how supportive environments are constructed on Access to HE courses, despite the shifts in external policy contexts, this article uses a community of practice framework, drawing on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998), to analyse how Access to HE students interact and engage in shared activities facilitated by their tutors to develop shared repertoires of knowledge and resources that help their learning and help them to engage in learning successfully. However, communities of practice should not be conceived as ‘cohesive and homogenous social objects’ (Handley et al. 2006, 642), so the paper also considers the dynamic processes involved in the formation and reproduction of a community of practice in particular socio-economic and policy contexts. It leads us to challenge critically what is meant by a community of practice in particular educational contexts.

### Learning and Communities of Practice

Access to HE courses exhibit many of the characteristics of the communities of practice or groups that Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) describe. In the view of Lave and Wenger (1991) individuals learn by being assimilated into the socio-cultural practices of a community or group, gaining competence through knowledge and skill development acquired both from those given authority over them and from those established members of a group who are perceived as having knowledge of practice through experience in it. Learning is perceived as a collective, relational and social process (Fuller 2007) that occurs as a result of participation in a group or community of practice. In the case of AHE courses, these groups are intentionally constructed by FE Colleges, normally once a year, in the early Autumn. AHE course tutors are delegated responsibility for organising and managing these courses by the senior staff in an FE College. They are also responsible to the awarding bodies for the Access to HE diploma for delivering the curriculum of the courses.

Individuals can negotiate membership of groups and communities and gain status within them on the basis of their expertise in practices and language (Lave and Wenger 1991) relevant to the group. The process of entry into a group is construed as a process of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991). Through this, new members develop shared practices, adopt a common identity and build up
mutually interdependent relationships (Wenger 1998). ‘To know is to be capable of participating with the requisite competence in the complex web of relationships among people and activities’ (Gherardi, Nicolini and Odella 1998, 274). This implies that social relations are formed, negotiated and sustained around the activity which has brought individuals together as well as through participation between members in various social spaces and between multiple contexts (James 2007). Developing competence in knowledge and skill is important in the identity formation of new members. Constructing social artefacts, such as knowledge and skills, as well as agreed means of working, can allow the dynamic negotiation of new norms and meanings in a community. However, those members whose views depart noticeably from a community’s norms are likely to remain or become marginal or peripheral (Lave and Wenger 1991) to it.

The collective work-related identity that group members develop is reflected in the culture they construct through their interactions. The culture of a group underlies and surrounds all the actions that go on in it (Hopkins 2001), driving shared patterns of behaviour (Robbins 2003). It encompasses subtle dynamics such as members’ perceived social functions and assumptions, articulated and unarticulated cues about members’ status, rule-making, behavioural norms, and boundary and periphery definitions (Wenger 1998, 117). As well as representing a nexus of particular values and beliefs, sometimes described as a community’s ‘ethos’ or ‘atmosphere’, it provides the basis of a shared enterprise, involving mutual accountability (Wenger 1998). Negotiating a joint enterprise involves members of a group having a sense of responsibility as individuals and as a community, working to benefit the community as well as themselves.

Developing a supportive learning community amongst tutors and students, including informal support structures among the student body, can help Access to HE students to cope with the demands of the AHE course and learn effectively (Jones 2006). AHE course tutors contribute to a supportive culture in these learning communities by being approachable and available to students and by structuring students’ learning experiences to meet students’ needs. The last includes brokering boundaries for student activity, for example between College authorities and Access to HE diploma award giving bodies. These wider institutional contexts are perceived by Wenger (1998, 114) as other communities. Playing a legitimate peripheral or boundary role can be an important and powerful position for a member of a community, in this case a tutor in the learning community of an AHE course (Wenger 1998, 169), especially when that role involves liaison with more powerful communities. Playing that role, however, creates and sustains unequal power relationships between members of a learning community, not least because tutors are licensed by their institution (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) to organise and lead students in learning on particular courses.

The Research Study

This multi-site case study used a social interactionist framework (Lave and Wenger 1991) and linked case study design (Miles and Huberman 1994) to investigate mature adult students’ perspectives of their changing learning identities through their developing relationships with their tutors and with each other during their
participation in Access to HE courses. Students and their tutors, were asked: Why Access to HE students after leaving school change their views on learning and themselves as learners; the nature and importance of the learning relationships constructed on AHE courses; and how AHE students’ perceptions of their courses and Higher Education are affected by changing policy contexts. Participants gave voluntary informed consent to participate and were aware they could leave the project at any time, which one or two in each college chose to do during the course of the academic year in which the study was carried out in three urban FE colleges, two medium sized and one large, in the East Midlands of England.

In each college data was collected from five to six self-selecting Access to HE students on Social Science/Humanities AHE courses, an under researched subject grouping of students in this under researched field, through focus group interviews carried out on three occasions during the academic year (December, February/March and April/May) as well as individual interviews with their tutors. Each focus group interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed manually using a form of thematic analysis which took account of participants own constructs of themselves and their experiences in particular contexts to shape the interpretation of the data. Trustworthiness in the study was established through triangulation of method and participant perspectives to help construct a stable interpretation of events (Reed-Danahay 2005).

Although the findings of the study are not generalisable to a wider population than its participants, the themes that emerge raise questions that need to be considered in other similar institutions and courses nationally. Any names used, whether for Access to HE students or for the Colleges (e.g. Coll A) are fictitious for ethical reasons.

Access to HE courses as learning communities

Drawing on a conceptualisation of a community of practice as ‘groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly’ (Wenger 1998, 72), the data from this study is considered under three headings which are derived from what are said to be the essential components of a community of practice: mutual engagement and joint enterprise; members working together, sharing activities; developing a shared repertoire of resources through tutor activity. The last, however, also highlights a characteristic of communities of practice that is implicit but poorly worked out in the theory of Wenger (1998): that of inequalities of power in communities of practice (Harris and Shelswell 2005; Busher, Hammersley-Fletcher, and Turner 2007) and how these are linked to peripheral or boundary roles. There seemed to be very little difference between the views expressed by the students in all three of the colleges, except in one college, where students tended to see their communities primarily as work groups rather than friendship groups, a distinction which students in the other two colleges blurred.

*Mutual Engagement and joint enterprise: How did the group become a group?*
Learners negotiate identity congruence with peer groups to create a sense of belonging and engagement and do this by establishing a common identity or disassociating themselves from difference (Hughes 2010). When asked who they were, a common response by students in this study was, ‘I am a mature student’. One student commented that those on the Access to HE course were ‘not necessarily mature in age but mature in attitude’ (Coll B Feb). The perspective of claimed maturity seemed linked to students’ non-traditional academic backgrounds and differential life experiences. It celebrated their academic commitment. ‘Everyone that’s here wants to be here. Everyone that’s here knows what they want to do and there’s just a massive amount of focus in our class’ (Coll B Dec). One of the tutors suggested that, ‘the sense of being part of a group with the same aim and the same mission … It’s like an identity almost occurs within them’ (Coll B Dec).

The younger AHE students sought to include themselves on the appropriate side of the ‘opposition between committed self-disciplined maturity and feckless youth’ (Warmington 2002, 595). One claimed to admire the older students who did the course alongside having families and children.

There’s a lady on our course who has three kids... she’s a single parent and … this isn’t her homeland and she’s pretty much the best student in the class. Everything she does comes out straight distinction. She really works. And it just makes me think like…If she can do it … (Coll A Mar).

This identity as a mature student can be seen as a shared competence which distinguished the Access to HE students from the others in their respective colleges. [In the library] We want to sit there and get on. Put your earphones on and type away. Whereas there’s people that are sitting on computers, standing around chatting and just giggling and doing childish things that we no longer want to do (Coll C Dec).

The students also distanced themselves from their younger selves, constructing their identities by simultaneously constructing their younger selves as the other. ‘We actually listen now. That’s the difference. When I was younger I never used to listen’ (Coll A Dec).

This discourse of maturity and difference was acknowledged by AHE tutors who saw their students as mature and motivated in contrast to the younger students they had experience of teaching:

For me teaching highly motivated adults, they just have so much more... We’re all geared up to be working for success, whereas sometimes with sixteen, seventeen year olds, there’s still that them and us (Coll B Dec)

The difference between Access to HE students’ attitudes to their education and those of their younger counterparts was attributed by the tutors to the struggles and hurdles the students had to overcome to be on the course. ‘Generally they’re really committed, really dedicated and really appreciate the opportunity ‘cos it’s the second time round’ (Coll A Dec).

Those tutors who, themselves, had been on Access to HE course claimed an understanding of these struggles.
I respect their individual circumstances and I understand the journey that they had to kind of undertake to get where they are ... I know how hard it is. I have done an access course. So I do know how hard it all is (Col B Dec).

The mature student identity was not shared by all students and there were some who were viewed as outsiders by their peers. At one college the students talked about members of the group who were seen as different as they ‘want to mess around and do nothing’ (Coll A Mar). Students who did not share the hard working mature student ethic were also left on the margins when it came to receiving help. ‘There’s some students that would ask to read my work and I wouldn’t give them... Because they haven’t completed theirs’ (Coll C Dec). Those students who dropped out were also thought by students in the focus groups not to accept the mature student work ethic. ‘I think they liked the idea, but they didn’t like the thought that you’d got to do work’ (Coll B May).

Tutors, too, thought that not all Access to HE students engaged with the mature student identity. In part they attributed this to a shift in the age profile of AHE students with cohorts getting younger since the bottom age limit for the courses of 21 years had been removed.

Five years ago it was very much an adult environment and very much a more mature sort of work focused situation. In some of the groups we [now] get with the younger students we are doing a lot of behaviour management, classroom management (Coll A Mar).

Further Education may gain reluctant participants who lack suitable alternatives for education or work and do not positively make the choice to enter an institution (Biggart and Furlong 1996). Tutors thought the younger students tended to need a bit more support and supervision.

On the whole people who are perhaps in their late thirties or something like that, I find extremely committed. People who are perhaps twenty who maybe didn’t do very well at ‘A’ level and kind of dropped out [are] just thinking, “oh what can I do now?” (Coll C Dec)

Working together ‘We all know why we’re here’

Depth of learning is highly relevant to community formation. ‘The sooner the participants feel they are really engaged in learning together, the sooner community formation ensues’ (Harris and Shelswell 2005, 170). The students on the Access to HE courses engaged with their peers in various ways to provide help and support to each other. One way was in helping with instrumental knowledge about skills or topics on the course.

If anyone wants my help … then I don’t mind. I would like their help as well in return. If we work together, like if there’s an assignment that needs to be done … it’ll all get done much quicker than one person struggling on their own (Coll A Dec).
Another was offering each other advice, guidance and moral support with learning in college and life outside of it. The students all tended to have similar problems and were working towards the same goal.

There have been some lovely people that I have met throughout the course... These people for me really provided a support network throughout the course and it was helpful and encouraging that I was able to confide in some about whatever other things were going on in life and them with me (Coll C May).

These emergent social networks gave students a sense of community.

[The course] almost becomes, for a while, your focus and your family. Probably more so than the support from your partners because you’re with these people with a common cause and so community is majorly important to them and it carries on after access too (Coll B Dec).

The social networks seemed to strengthen in stages, developing most strongly as students grouped together to get through tough periods of learning work, as one of the tutors noted.

It’s a bit like a surge. They’ll come together as a group at different times of the year. So sometimes when it starts to get tough, you find they group together more and they are more kind of supportive of each other, and then at the end when it’s all over, everyone’s sort of, you know, bosom buddies (Coll A Mar).

However, not all of the students worked together. ‘We do support each other, but I think like there [are] a few individuals who like to just get on with it themselves’ (Coll A Dec). Some of the tutors also viewed some students as ‘selfish learners’, while some students noted the competition between students for places on university courses. Further, not all students thought that they constructed communities amongst themselves, even if the majority of them worked together to achieve common instrumental goals.

So the relationships are good in college but I don’t think outside of college they mix that much. It seems very specific to the course … it doesn’t seem to extend beyond that point (Coll A Dec)

These sceptical students related community with friendship and socialising, which was not something they were looking for on joining the Access to HE courses, even if some of them found it. They perceived their relationships with other people on their courses as more like relationships at work which they described as professional (Coll C Dec). The term community is ‘far from neutral, as it carries connotations of harmony and togetherness’ (Fuller 2007, 20).

**Developing a repertoire of shared resources: ‘The tutors will help anybody’**

‘In order to function, communities of practice require the promotion of mutual respect and support between participants’ (Harris and Shelswell 2005, 167). This was reflected in the interviews with the Access to HE students and was seen by them as one of the major differences between learning at school and learning on the AHE
courses. This ethic of mutual respect and support was in part promoted by the students themselves, as has been shown above, and in part by the tutors.

You respect your teacher and she gives us the same respect back. She treats you as an individual on the same level as her almost. There’s none of that ‘I’m your teacher’ (Coll B Dec).

This generated ambivalent relationships between tutors and students that were suffused with power (Foucault 1977) to allow tutors to maintain institutional hierarchy. ‘We are not [students’] friends and that’s the boundary you can’t cross, but we are people that they can trust [and] will be honest with them (Coll A Dec). Students accepted this perspective. ‘Obviously they have to keep that boundary where they can’t be our friends. They have to be our tutor’ (Coll A Mar). However, tutors also had to construct relationships with students of professional empathy and care to create a culture of collaboration and support for learning. Students wanted to be treated like adults, but they were there to learn and needed help from their tutors.

For a community to function, power inequalities between teacher and learners must remain explicit and become accepted (Harris and Shelswell 2005, 168), although these do shift the relationships between members of a community, possibly to the point where the notion of community itself comes under scrutiny. Increased performative pressures on tutors through changes to assessment procedures on Access to HE courses and requirements for high performance/success rates for students in FE colleges had an impact on student-tutor relationships. As one tutor noted,

We’ve become more distant because of it ... We used to have a very, almost too open, policy with that staffroom where students were in and always buzzing around in that staffroom. And since grading’s come in, actually they’re no longer admitted in the staffroom because we were getting hassled about grades constantly (Coll A Dec)

These shifts in tutors’ roles highlight the peripheral/boundary nature of tutors’ participation in the communities of practice on the Access to HE courses. It emphasises their status as go-betweens with other powerful communities in and outside the college that set the norms for success against which students and AHE courses are evaluated and which the tutors are expected to deliver. Changing social practices and relationships between tutors and students have begun to alter the nature of participation in communities of practice (James 2007) on these courses.

Discussion and conclusion

The study presented in this paper has used a community of practice framework (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) to analyse and understand whether the Access to HE courses evolved into communities of practice, how students participated in these, and the tutors’ boundary/peripheral roles. It has also presented the mechanisms of mutual engagement in learning through which communities appeared to emerge and why not all students seemed to become engaged with them. In developing this analysis, the importance of inequalities of power within the courses/communities emerged as well as the importance of core values which helped students to define their identities in relation to each other on the
Access to HE courses and other students on other courses in the FE colleges. The communities that emerged had varying degrees of consensus, diversity and conflict among those who identified with, or were identified as belonging to those communities as Contu and Wilmott (2003) also found. In these communities, both students and tutors asserted particular values that helped to construct communities of practice that encouraged student engagement with learning. Yet the internal operations and relationships of these communities were regulated and shaped by wider institutional contexts (James 2007) through the peripheral activities of tutors negotiating with policy and curriculum contexts.

The findings also show the dynamic nature of relationships between Access to HE students and between students and tutors within the Access to HE course communities at a number of different, interrelated levels. There was evidence of ‘competing conceptions of the community of practice between members’ (James 2007, 132). Initially, mature students often distanced themselves from the younger Access to HE students believing that they might not have the same work ethic as themselves. The younger students found they did not have the same sense of belonging to the emergent groups on the courses until they manifested the same work ethic and hunger to go on to study in HE as their older colleagues. Mature and younger Access to HE students did not always share a common repertoire to mutually engage in joint learning processes which undermined the potential of effective knowledge sharing. The emergence of communities of practice did not always lead to harmonising practices that were coherent and consensual, as implied by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998).

Access to HE students generally had a shared understanding of respect for their tutors which, generally, was reciprocated by the tutors. Tutors were perceived by the students as highly valued members of the community, who were central to the fulfilment of its purposes. None the less, the tutors played important boundary/peripheral roles in negotiating with other powerful communities (e.g. college senior management teams, Access to HE diploma awarding bodies) that shaped the activities and processes of engagement within the course learning communities and were an important source of tutors’ power (Busha 2006). This fits with the view of Wenger (1998) about the importance of peripheral roles to communities of practice.

Acknowledging the hierarchical formal distribution of power in these communities is overlooked in models of collaborative cultures and communities of practice (Hatcher 2005). This oversight constructs false assumptions of greater equality between learning community members in educational contexts than is actually the case. For example, the Access to HE tutors had more power and influence than their students as a result of their access to a variety of resources (Giddens 1984), including their formal authority to stipulate the desired behaviour of students and to clarify students’ roles and responsibilities (Busha 2006). Access to HE tutors acted as gatekeepers to the course communities, trying to exert control over the incomers (Lave and Wenger 1991) by expecting them to conform to codes of practice and language, or to learn these, before they were permitted full or core membership of the group. Access tutors also exerted power by giving students access to the knowledge and skills needed to gain the Access to HE diploma, and by evaluating and grading students work. Access to HE tutors’ positions in the course communities left them socially slightly apart from the students, but allowed them to project power to steer the
community in directions to make learning as successful as possible (Bush, Hammersley-Fletcher, and Turner 2007) as well as retain a sense of ownership in the development and processes of the community of practice (Handley et al. 2006).

However, mature Access students also exerted power and influence over the ways in which the communities of practice developed as they determined the nature of the practices and values (Bush 2006) that were established as core to the communities, helping to define criteria for core membership of the communities. Those students who did not manifest these values appear to have been relegated to being peripheral members of the communities. Students could also demand support from tutors to help them learn effectively to achieve their goals and could inhibit Access tutors from governing or managing the courses without their agreement if the tutors were not meeting students’ needs and expectations. It reinforced the situated and political character of learning: ‘People differ in their abilities and bases of power to engage each other in the situation of complex activities, thus generating unnecessary tensions and struggles.’ (Hong and O 2009, 322).

Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theory and Wenger’s (1998) analysis offer important insights into understanding the nature of the communities of practice that emerged on the Access to HE courses. Yet, their analysis tends to assume a collaborative and harmonious community, which was not always the case. The social location of communities of practice in relation to wider sets of institutional contexts can impact on the internal operations of communities as well as determining the reformation and existence of a community, its nature and boundaries, as was evident in the Access to HE courses. This involved power and negotiation about means and ways of participating in learning and the construction of acceptable knowledge outcomes. Finally, the study shows that forms of participation in communities of practice can be more complex and diverse in educational contexts, involving negotiation between unequal partners – both students and tutors – who have asymmetrical power relationships.

References


Hinsliff-Smith, K. 2010. “It is Nice to Know that We Might be Doing Something Right. Research Findings from a Case Study of Access Learners on a UK Diploma in Nursing Programme.” *Paul Hamlyn Foundation conference on retention and attrition* Leeds: UK


