



Understanding Learning in Senior Public Relations Practices: from boundary spanning to boundary dwelling

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Abstract

Over the last 50 years, the social legitimacy of public relations has improved through standardising and monitoring the education and training of its practitioners. This article argues however that while successful in developing a professional development trajectory from novice to competent practitioner, the profession has struggled to fully understand the development trajectory of senior public relations practices. The diversity of occupational contexts in which public relations is practised, the condition of professional seniority and the knowledges and tools required for working at occupational boundaries is challenging for senior public relations practitioners. It is also a challenge therefore, for the profession to develop and support the learning required for senior practice beyond competency frameworks. This article suggests that socio-cultural learning theory offers a potentially fruitful way of understanding what and how senior professionals learn that requires public relations to develop a clearer conceptual understanding of the relationship between knowledge and practice. 'Communities of practice' has been influential in the fields of management and organisations (Bolisani and Scarso, 2014) but this article employs the idea of a learning process that takes place in 'constellations of practices' (Wenger, 1998) to offer a view of senior practice as boundary dwelling (Engestrom, 2009) rather than boundary spanning. Senior practitioner learning therefore, is 'situated' (Lave and Wenger, 1991) in the liminal spaces those boundaries provide and should be understood as inherently uncertain and always becoming. The article argues in consequence, there is a pressing need for senior practitioner learning to be more effectively supported by the professional group.

Background

Over the last 50 years, the social legitimacy of public relations has improved through standardising and monitoring of the education and training of its practitioners. However, while successful in developing a professional development trajectory from novice to competent practitioner, the occupation has struggled to fully understand and, therefore, support the professional development trajectory of senior public relations practice (L'Etang and Powell, 2013a). The absence of sufficient definitional clarity about what senior practice entails raises questions not only about the knowledges¹, skills and experiences required to operate at this level but also about how and where senior practice is learned.

As an idea, communities of practice has been influential in the fields of management and organisations (Bolisani and Scarso, 2014) and adopted as a toolkit for consultancy interested in organisational productivity, creativity and flexibility (Coakes and Clarke, 2006, Cordery et al, 2015, Laxton and Appleby, 2010). In the field of education, the idea of learning being “situated” (Lave and Wenger, 1991) in “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1998) introduced a significant shift away from the idea of learning as the acquisition of knowledge transmitted through a linear transaction. The transmission model of learning worked with an assumption of deficit at the level of the individual. Novices (members on the *periphery* of the core community) were understood as empty containers ready to be filled with reified assets by more knowledgeable practitioners (community *insiders*). Socio-cultural

¹ While English grammar dictates that *knowledge* does not take the plural form of *knowledges*, the literature on education from which much of this conceptual framework has been derived makes the point of highlighting the distinct bodies of knowledge learners develop in practical contexts by using the term “knowledges” and thus, drawing attention to this particular theoretical point by the violation of grammatical rules.

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3 approaches to understanding learning, on the other hand, emphasised knowledge as a
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6 social construction in which person, practice and social world were inextricably linked.
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12 Community of practice describes a distinctive learning context in which knowledge is a
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15 product of participation in communities and constructed along three dimensions: mutual
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18 engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire. The emphasis on the social community
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21 as the primary unit of analysis challenges the idea of knowledge as fixed and stable and the
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24 property of an individual. A socio-cultural approach to learning in public relations suggests
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27 the need for a better conceptual understanding of the relationship between knowledge and
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30 practice in order to understand what professional seniority implies. This work raises
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33 interesting questions not only about the diversity of occupational contexts in which public
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36 relations is practised and the learning that takes place therein as a consequence, about how
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39 senior learning might be mapped, developed, supported and authenticated, but also about
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42 where responsibility for supporting and developing it should be located. This article draws
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45 on socio-cultural learning theory to address the following: (i) what constitutes senior
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48 professional practice (beyond its reified codification)? (ii) How does it develop and where
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51 does it take place?
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53 **Approaches to Learning**

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56 The development of psychology as a modern scientific discipline in the twentieth century
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58 encouraged new thinking and research about the process of learning. For
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60 Stimulus/Response theorists, or Behaviourists (Pavlov, 1927; Skinner, 1957), the key

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3 motivation was external to the individual, such as reward or punishment for example.
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6 While this work produced an account of learning evidenced by changes in observed
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8 behaviours, it shed little light on how less visible functions such as thinking, understanding,
9
10 and reasoning were learned or the role language and communication played in the process.

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12 Research about learning in cognitive psychology on the other hand, focussed on mental
13
14 structure and the way the brain processes information to explain the internal drivers of
15
16 thought and action (Bartlett, 1932), while work in developmental psychology (Piaget, 1976)
17
18 looked at the relationship between intellectual development and the life course to explore
19
20 learning as a sequential process. Social psychologists such as Vygotsky (1978), identified
21
22 both internal and external factors as being significant to intellectual development by
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24 understanding how higher order thinking, the more abstract and complex conceptual
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26 intellectual processes, develops in the relationship between cognition and context.
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38 This emphasis on a relationship between action and the formation of thought (Kozulin,
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40 1998) was initially perceived to be salient only for formal school-based learning. More
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42 recent developments in professional education, however, have also begun to emphasise the
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44 usefulness of the relationship between individual cognition and social interaction for
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46 understanding the role of the workplace as a legitimate context for authentic professional
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48 learning (Webster-Wright, 2010).
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Cognition and context: situated learning

“Rather than defining [learning] as the acquisition of propositional knowledge, Lave and Wenger situate learning in certain forms of co-participation. Rather than asking what kinds of cognitive processes and conceptual structures are involved, they ask what kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place.” (Foreword by William F. Hanks in Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 14)

The idea of situated learning locates the individual learner in multiple and increasingly complex systems. Lave and Wenger (1991) describe this as “a set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (p.98). The concept of community of practice, thus, draws on Vygotsky’s (1978) attention to interactions and cognition when Lave and Wenger (1991) observe that “learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners”. They go on to stress however, the importance of group processes and structures when they continue, “and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the socio-cultural practices of community” (ibid, p. 29). Wenger’s later work (1998) introduced the more useful idea of “constellations of practices” (pp.126-128) and the role of cognitive dissonance triggered by the tension between continuity and displacement (p.42). By this time, Activity Theorists such as Yrjo Engestrom (“collaborative community”), Ann Edwards (“relational agency”) and Harry Daniels (visible and invisible mediation, communicative action, interagency work) were also grappling with the problem of overlapping communities in different settings and how to capture knowledge mobilised by practitioners in the process of addressing complex problems in changing work environments. For these activity theorists, therefore, the locus of interest was less how

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3 practitioners develop competence as full members of a single core community — or how
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5 they become “insiders”, to use Wenger’s model of trajectories of participation (see below)
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8 — and more on how knowledges are distributed across communities of practice in the
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10 process of generating new understandings both in and about practices.
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18 In communities of practice, learning takes place when participants engage in highly
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20 interactive practices. The notion of situated learning implies an iterative and recursive
21
22 process where each *actional context* generates new meaning, understanding and learning
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24 and does not necessarily imply that in the process the learner acquires a set of fixed mental
25
26 representations or *self-contained structures* (Lave and Wenger, 1991). It is precisely the
27
28 *differences* that mediate new learning among co-participants engaged in activity and the
29
30 necessary distribution — or perhaps more accurately — re-distribution and reconfiguration
31
32 of knowledges and practices. Consequently, the approach in this article assumes that
33
34 knowledge/learning is neither the property of an individual nor the property of an
35
36 organisation/institution but is situated in the socio-cultural practices that shape it and thus
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38 is the property of the activity that created it. The aim in this research reported here is to
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40 explore how this different conceptualisation of knowledge and learning can enrich the
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42 current understanding of senior public relations practice.
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54 **Researching the practices of senior professionals**

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58 Public Relations practitioners located in Central Scotland and the Highlands, who self-
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60 identified as senior, were invited to participate in three activities (focus group, in-depth

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3 semi-structured interview and one-to-one mentoring) during which ideas about
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5 professionalism, professionalisation, the role of professional bodies and the notion of
6
7 professional practice were also explored.
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15 A small focus group activity comprised of experienced public relations practitioners who are
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17 considered by their community to have seniority in the field made visible a considerable gap
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19 in the provision of professional development opportunities for senior practitioners.
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23 Following on from this activity, a call for interviewees was facilitated through the
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25 professional bodies (Chartered Institute for Public Relations [CIPR] and the Public Relations
26
27 Consultants Association [PRCA]) in Scotland. The resulting sample self-identified as senior
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29 and included fifteen female and twelve male interviewees from the public and private
30
31 sectors working in agency and in-house contexts in a range of organisations such as global
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33 corporate, local government, public bodies, charities, lobbying and political consultancy and
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35 professional bodies. Job titles included heads of corporate affairs, public policy, corporate
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37 communication and information, public affairs, directors, managing directors as well as
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39 managers.
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51 The interview data elicited from 27 practitioners through semi-structured interviews were
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53 analysed using qualitative analysis software (NVivo). The analytical model operationalised
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55 “community of practice” using Wenger’s key themes but the addition of “seniority”
56
57 generated a richer account of individual learning. This work indicates that whilst the idea of
58
59 community of practice is useful for understanding how novice professionals learn, it has
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3 insufficient explanatory power for understanding how senior professionals learn. However,
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6 by combining Wenger's idea of "constellations of practices" with the idea of senior public
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8 relations practice as boundary dwelling rather than boundary spanning, it is possible to
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10 make the move towards that understanding. **Boundary spanning has been extensively used in**
11
12 **the context of management (and public relations) to refer to an organisational function of**
13
14 **adaptation and consequently studied as strategic organizational behaviour (Aldrich and Herker,**
15
16 **1977; Long and Hazleton 1987) that involves bridging the organisational boundary. As such, the**
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18 **concept is premised on a sharp distinction between what is and is not a defining feature of an**
19
20 **organization. More recently, boundary spanning has been studied as an individual-level competence**
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22 **(Williams, 2002).**

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29 **This article offers a conceptualisation of boundary as the liminal space where multiple bodies of**
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31 **knowledge and organisational logics relevant to public relations practices (its constellations) meet,**
32
33 **and boundary dwelling as inhabiting (rather than bridging) this liminal space.**

43 **Senior public relations practitioners: practice, learning and knowledge**

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45
46 **This next section will engage with the interview data to explore the utility of the conceptual**
47
48 **framework outlined above and develop the argument at a more synthetic level in the**
49
50 **context of senior public relations practitioners.**

55 **Community of practice: joint enterprise, shared repertoire, mutual engagement**

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58 For Wenger "the source of coherence of a community is the mutual engagement of
59
60 participants" (1998, p. 73). In other words, neither the organisation, the status afforded by

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3 position nor spatial proximity (geographic or interpersonal networks for example) is
4
5 sufficient to confer community membership. Membership of a community of practice,
6
7 therefore, requires an understanding of the practices of community maintenance that
8
9 enables engagement beyond the instrumental and “does not entail homogeneity” (p.75) but
10
11 includes both complementary and overlapping competences. Mutual engagement can be
12
13 located in the nexus of engaged diversity, doing things together, relationships, social
14
15 complexity and community maintenance. Consequently, mutual engagement implicates
16
17 both community and membership in a continuous process or practice of becoming and
18
19 unbecoming (a process of continuously negotiating and renegotiating professional identities
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21 and expertise). The process of recognising other members of the community (who do I do
22
23 this with?) and constructing its coherence requires both familiarity and unfamiliarity with its
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25 routines.
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34 actually a lot of it is done by other people that you don't really have any control over
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36 because some of the biggest profile raising opportunities are what your chief
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38 executive does or what your [another organisation] does, you have absolutely no
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40 control over that (Marketing Manager, National Charity)
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49 Wenger argues that spatial or temporal proximity does not necessarily confer community
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51 membership, yet this data yields some evidence of what Wenger describes as “local
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53 coherence”:
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3 An advantage in this sort of role in Scotland is that we are a reasonably tight polity
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5 community. You know the key people you need to speak to; all know each other
6
7 pretty well. (Director, National Membership Organisation)
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12 I think if I was trying to pitch some of the stories that I'm able to get in the Scottish
13
14 media at the UK level, there wouldn't be any interest. Similarly... we have a good
15
16 relationship with MSPs [Members of Scottish Parliament]: if we want to see them
17
18 about something we get in so quickly. I think there are advantages to working in
19
20 Scotland that actually kind of the accessibility is a better thing in Scotland that makes
21
22 the job easier. (Head of Public Affairs, National Membership Organisation)
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34 A further indicator of how practice operates to cohere a community is what Wenger terms
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36 "joint enterprise" — operationalised in the analysis by the question of "What is *this*?", 'this'
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38 connoting the enterprise that is senior PR practice — that involves participants in using the
39
40 tools of negotiation and accountability collectively. Community of practice shares
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42 responsibility for both the negotiation of what its members do as well as being mutually
43
44 accountable to the collective for what they do. The interviews indicate that whilst
45
46 articulating the enterprise of senior practice is difficult (see discussion of professional
47
48 seniority below), mutual accountability is complex and operates on a number of levels, not
49
50 least in relation to how mutuality might be thought about as a fluid concept existing across
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52 community boundaries:
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3 I don't really have a peer group to draw on really ... I get on really really well with my
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5 equivalent in [another organisation] and we'll sometimes put aside our
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8 organisational objective and go: "I think you did that really well or you did this really
9
10 well." (Head of Public Affairs, National Membership Organisation)
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14 The former president of [another organisation] gave me sort of ... tip off there was
15
16 going to be [his members'] protest the next day because he had respect for me and
17
18 knew that we worked well together with this organisation. (Head of Public Affairs,
19
20 National Membership Organisation)
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24
25 Wenger's third characteristic of practice as a source of community coherence and a
26
27 resource for the negotiation of meaning is the repertoire of artefacts (tools that can include
28
29 documents, stories, websites, symbols, routines) the community draws upon in its practice.
30
31 He argues that shared beliefs are not indicative of shared practice but there may be some
32
33 evidence in this research data of a connection between the two. The shared beliefs include
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35 here, for example, the role of the media, beliefs about the public sector, about health, or
36
37 young people and as there does appear to be a link between belief and practice, they may
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39 be seen as mutually constitutive.
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49 The application of the concept of community of practice to senior public relations
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51 practitioners suggests therefore, that while there is a sense of their practice (and learning)
52
53 being situated in context, locating a coherent community is more elusive. The characteristic
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55 features of mutual engagement, shared repertoire and joint enterprise can be found, but
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57 are refracted through multi-professional work settings to re-situate the community to which
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3 senior practitioners feel they belong at another level of context such as the professional or
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5 the cultural. The questions thus that need to be articulated and confronted at this stage
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7
8 relate to the nature of this elusive and fractured community: With whom are the senior
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10 public relations practices and beliefs shared? How do we locate the communities of
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12 practice in which senior practitioners learn and the type of knowledge activity produced?
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20 **From community of practice to constellations of practices?**

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23 Some researchers working with the idea of community of practice as the setting for learning
24
25 have pointed out its limitations and complications for empirical research (Eraut, 2002;
26
27 Hughes, Jewson and Unwin, 2007), particularly in respect to professions in workplaces that
28
29 depend on multi-professional teamwork, as may often be the case for public relations.
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33 Commenting on a paper about healthcare practitioners, Eraut writes,

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37 [The] paper challenges the notion of community of practice with evidence that
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39 occupational identity is still linked in several important aspects to membership of a
40
41 profession, and a professional is a much larger and more diverse community than any
42
43 community of practice [...] If one defines a community as all the healthcare workers in a
44
45 particular location, then multiple professions imply multiply perspectives and multiple
46
47 practices, the antithesis of a community of practice' (2002, p.11)
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52
53 Eraut here seems to take a very extreme position suggesting that it is impossible to
54
55 reconcile different professional identifications within a shared practical enterprise (cf
56
57 Edwards, 2010); this research, however, suggests that it may be fruitful to develop Wenger's
58
59 later conceptualisation of *constellations* of practices (Wenger, 1998) as a way of locating
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3 learning at the boundaries between overlapping communities where shared interests are
4
5 linked in a number of ways. *Constellation* is a looser configuration than *community*: it
6
7 recognises relations between individuals without imposing the requirement of a certain
8
9 level of similarity, proximity, or coherence that characterise a single community of practice.
10
11 Constellation thus might be based on, for example, a related rather than shared enterprise,
12
13 or having membership in common, or competing for the same resource. The questions that
14
15 arise are, therefore, how to recognise constellations for senior learning and the nature of
16
17 the relationship on which the constellation is based.
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28 The proposition that learning is situated in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger,
29
30 1991) has been utilised in research on learning in a range of workplace environments. This
31
32 work has included forms of knowledge production broadly described as oriented around
33
34 craft or task-based activity such as hairdressers (Billett, 2007), butchers, midwives and
35
36 tailors (Lave and Wenger, 1991) as well as forms of production oriented around professional
37
38 activity (Edwards 2010; Webster-Wright, 2009) in sport (Owen-Pugh, 2007), education
39
40 (Kimble and Hindreth, 2008) and health (Engestrom, 2007). At the core of this work is the
41
42 notion of apprenticeship and mapping the learning trajectory from novice, (legitimate
43
44 peripheral participation) to master (insider). Learning through participation at the periphery
45
46 of the core community involves crafting and reproducing the already existing knowledge
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48 activities and skills of the core community guided by those who are the insiders until
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50 mastery has been achieved
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58 Legitimate peripheral participation provides a way to speak about the relations
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60 between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and

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2
3 communities of knowledge and practice. It concerns the process by which
4
5 newcomers become part of a community of practice. A person's intentions to learn
6
7 are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of
8
9 becoming a full participant in a socio-cultural practice. (Lave and Wenger, 1991,
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11 p.29)
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16
17 Much of this earlier work focusing on professional novices such as nurses, junior doctors, or
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19 teachers assumed the participation of more senior professional colleagues who were
20
21 spatially and temporally coterminous with the more novice practitioners (Daniels et al,
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23 2010).
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31 Thus while the notion of the community of practice and of legitimate peripheral
32
33 participation has some traction here, when it comes to professional learning in the
34
35 workplace, and particularly as it applies to senior practitioners, the concept may function
36
37 more as an imagined community (Anderson, 1983): it may function as Wenger has also
38
39 suggested (2000) as a mental map and a point of reference more powerfully than a physical,
40
41 co-located community. It may also be useful, therefore, to consider the possibility of
42
43 community of practice existing for practitioners at boundary crossing points (individual/
44
45 organisational/professional). The development of senior expertise, requires a tolerance of
46
47 what might be considered 'outsider' knowledges and practices (or *illegitimate peripheral*
48
49 participation). In short, the article explores how public relations practice and learning, and
50
51 senior practice and learning in particular, can be seen as relational, the nature of
52
53 relationships which bring the practices together, and the implications this might have for
54
55 supporting the development of senior practice. The next section of the article therefore,
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3 returns to the experiences of senior practitioners in a more phenomenologically sensitive
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5 way to reconstruct its inherent logic.
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10 11 12 **The condition of professional seniority** 13

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16 “It’s just not acceptable to make mistakes at senior level ... not an option”
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19 (Communications Director, Statutory Organisation)
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22 As a term senior is deployed commonly in public relations although it is not clearly defined
23
24 and therefore intrinsically problematic from a realist perspective (but see Sha, 2011). In
25
26 earlier research (L’Etang and Powell, 2013b) however, the term resonated with practitioners
27
28 because it has been employed within the occupation for decades and connotes a value that
29
30 it was important to explore and understand. Consequently, in the 27 interviews analysed
31
32 here the term “senior” formed the basis for discussion on practitioner conceptualisations of
33
34 what constitutes senior practice beyond that conferred either within or by organisational or
35
36 professional structures such as job title, position within an organisation, status of an
37
38 organisation and so on. Interviewees were encouraged to confront these challenges and to
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40 reflect on past experience and develop reflexive thinking with regard to their experiences.
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51 As a coding theme therefore, *Seniority* pulled together material where attempts were made
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53 to articulate the distinctiveness or particularity of senior practice. The most commonly
54
55 constructed explanations rely on the notion of strategic work and an ability to operate at
56
57 the strategic level. In such explanations, however, public relations specialist knowledge
58
59 activity or level of performance was frequently juxtaposed with more generic and routine
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3 communications knowledge activity, described as “front line” work (Director, National
4
5
6 Membership Organisation), such as responding to the press, or “craft” work (Freelance,
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9 Political Consultancy).

10
11 dealing with the press can quite routinely be done at quite a junior level, what you
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13
14 need to be confident in is if something is coming up that does involve [something
15
16
17 new or] controversy it is being spotted and escalated ... and if there’s tricky
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20 judgment to be made (Director, National Membership Organisation)

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26 Unpacking the concept of senior practice made visible some of its dimensions that included
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28
29 the range of skills such as performing a boundary spanning role in relation to bodies of
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32 specialised knowledge (e.g. working side-by-side with management practitioners or
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35 politicians); strategic positioning and direction for a client organisation (e.g. reading the
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38 organisation’s environment and its stakeholders); making judgments that involve risk (both
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40
41 to practitioner’s and organisation’s reputation) and of having more responsibility (to the
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44 organisation):

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47 It is the ability to do lots of normal activities communications professionals do ... in a
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49
50 highly proficient way. [It is] about having that understanding but then taking it into a
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52
53 different level where you are fitting into ...what the organisation is trying to achieve
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56 [and] seeing past [it to appreciate] the unintended consequences that may arise
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59 from this piece of work [and] being able to mitigate potential risks. (Freelance,
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61
62 Political Consultancy)

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3 While senior practice is thus built on a range of common technical competences, it goes
4
5 beyond that by bringing in an outside perspective, or even multiple perspectives, to span
6
7 not only the organisational boundary but also the time horizon, i.e. choosing how to act in
8
9 the present by reaching into the future through the concept of risk and scenarios of the
10
11 imagined future. The boundary spanning role extends beyond connections with
12
13 organisations in the external environment to intelligence gathering and, effectively, to
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15 reshaping of the external environment as such:
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21 [The client organisation] want[s] you to be thinking strategically about their business
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23 and making connections that they are maybe not able to make because you're in a
24
25 different network, or multiple networks...' (Board Director, National Public Relations
26
27 Agency)
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36 Nevertheless, while senior-level performance can be characterised by its high position in the
37
38 organisational hierarchy, senior practitioners' power is simultaneously and paradoxically
39
40 precarious. One interviewee described, or more accurately "spill[ed] out" (Communications
41
42 Director, Statutory Organisation), a recent decision made by the senior management team,
43
44 of which she was a member, to cut PR from its ranks. It was a decision she agreed with in
45
46 the financial context of the organisation but the consequences for her capacity to deploy
47
48 public relations knowledges and skills at the senior level of the organisation had been
49
50 seriously undermined as a consequence. Another interviewee expressed senior precarity
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52 thus:
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3 It's not just about 'Oh, we've got our boardroom table position now, it's all over'...
4
5
6 because you'll get pushed out just as quickly as you get in if you [are not] part of the
7
8 value chain of the organisation. (Freelance, Political Consultancy)
9

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15 The same sense of tension can be seen in the way in which seniority is not a secure position
16
17 a practitioner comes to *occupy* in the professional or organisational hierarchy, but rather it
18
19 is a constant *public performance* of seniority that achieves success for the organisation:
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21

22
23 I'm intensely conscious that it is my duty to win things for [my organisation]. And
24
25 that that is actually how I continue to be able to put food on the table for my
26
27 children [and what] my career progression is entirely dependent on. (Director,
28
29 National Membership Organisation).
30
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33
34 Yet, the *work* public relations performs must remain private and behind-the-scenes: "most
35
36 successful [PR] is invisible." (Communications Director, Statutory Organisation)
37
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41
42
43 Perhaps the key to understanding the distinctiveness of senior-level public relations practice
44
45 is the notion of *judgment*, the ability to make the right call about the position or course of
46
47 action the client organisation should take:
48
49

50
51
52 You have to be able to learn to make decisions [...] you have to basically make a
53
54 judgment. [...] I'm asked by the chief executive 'What do you think we should do?'
55
56 then I have to say, well this is what I think we could do. ... I mean sometimes I don't
57
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1
2
3 really know, but you have to be able to weigh up the pros and cons. (Marketing
4
5
6 Manager, National Charity)
7
8
9

10
11
12 [What] makes a senior practitioner successful? I think there is a degree of
13
14 discernment about knowing where you can win [for your organisation]... .To do that
15
16 consciously as issues arise is to think what can we win, what's our specific achievable
17
18 result [...] and also I can give [the organisation] a reasonable prospect of [what's]
19
20 achievable. What else comprises a senior practitioner? I think a lot depends on
21
22 personal credibility and ability to sustain relationships of integrity with a wide range
23
24 of other people. (Director, National Membership Organisation)
25
26
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30
31 This was echoed during other interviews and one in particular suggested the very invisibility
32
33 of successful public relations practices was a problem in terms of evidencing the value of
34
35 these professional expert judgments: "[but] how do you measure strong relationships?"
36
37
38 (Communications Director, Statutory Organisation)
39
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41
42 While some interviewees found it difficult to account for the ability to accomplish senior-
43
44 level performance, on the whole perhaps the most significant factor appears to be
45
46 *experience*, although formal qualifications, training, and a particular kind of cognitive
47
48 capacity also come into play:
49
50

51
52
53 ... that's just time and experience and examples. [...] Sometimes I look at other Heads
54
55 of Communications [and] they haven't done the CIPR Diploma². How did they get
56
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² Qualifications offered by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations, usually but not exclusively taught by Higher Education institutions.

1
2
3 there? ... You don't have to do that to get to these jobs but I think it's very helpful.

4
5
6 (Marketing Manager, National Charity)

7
8
9 It's a combination of skill development and experience, the length of time, but it's
10
11 also again to do with an innate quality ... a sort of rolodex ... in your mind where you
12
13 can quickly flick back and forward and think [and] make connections quite fast.

14
15
16
17 (Board Director, National Public Relations Organisation)

18
19
20 According to these interviewees, thus, it appears that learning in practice is privileged over
21
22 other ways of learning. If being able to perform as a competent practitioner represents a
23
24 learning journey, the road can be scaffolded, i.e. made navigable, within the workplace by
25
26 more senior colleagues who may offer opportunities to perform with a greater level of
27
28 independence or in a wider range of roles. Alternatively, it can be managed by the learners
29
30 themselves by moving between organisations and jobs so that each move opens new
31
32 opportunities for learning. However, if the journey from novice towards competent
33
34 practitioner ('insider' in Wenger's terms) appears fairly well understood, the question of
35
36 how and what senior practitioners learn is more problematic. From this preliminary analysis,
37
38 it would appear that senior practitioners' learning trajectory takes them outside the
39
40 boundary of public relations (away from operating only as an insider) and directs attention
41
42 to other specialised bodies of knowledge and practices:
43
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50
51 Senior practitioners really need to understand what their organisation is about which
52
53 means they need to get to the broader skills around finance, marketing, people
54
55 management. (Freelance, Political Consultancy)

1
2
3 Depending on the person, I think it could be managing staff, performing appraisals; if
4
5 you are in a consultancy, knowing about ... how to budget, revenue, profit
6
7 forecasting.... being trained to become a trainer ...(Director, Global Public Relations
8
9 Organisation)
10
11
12
13
14 it's not PR any more ... all about managing people (Director of Communications,
15
16 Statutory Organisation)
17
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22

23 The question at this point is whether public relations specialists have anything new to learn
24
25 about communication and if they learn, how does this happen? This research data offers
26
27 some indications that given their public exposure and pressure for success mentioned
28
29 earlier, senior practitioners may experience learning as a lonely, uncomfortable, and
30
31 possibly risky business:
32
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34
35
36

37 My view with senior people is that the one-on-one tuition would be helpful,
38
39 mentoring from senior people because I think once you get to a certain level, you are
40
41 meant to know absolutely everything [and yet] you are always learning, that's what
42
43 this job is about. ... I mean things like this, you and me now. That's quite useful to my
44
45 professional development.... I've spoken to quite a few senior people who've said
46
47 that it's very difficult to go out and do a course if you don't want to show any sign of
48
49 weakness. (Director, Global Public Relations Organisation)
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51
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55 Senior practitioners' learning therefore, has a trajectory that does not fit comfortably with
56
57 the craft model described earlier yet it clearly also needs to be understood as situated
58
59 learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The next two sections offer a way forward by combining
60

1
2
3 Wenger's typology of learning trajectories (1998) with research in professional education
4
5
6 (Edwards, 2010, Webster-Wright, 2010, 2009) and activity theory (Engestrom, 2009).
7
8

9 **Towards an understanding of senior professional learning**

10
11
12 In his chapter on identity in practice Wenger argues "identity in practice arises out of an
13
14 interplay of participation and reification ... not an object, but a constant becoming. [...] As
15
16 we go through a succession of forms of participation, our identities form trajectories" (1998,
17
18 pp.153-154). He identifies five trajectories that describe five patterns of participation:
19
20 peripheral, inbound, insider, boundary and outbound (Wenger, 1998). The most salient for
21
22 the purposes of this argument are the insider trajectory that describes full membership of a
23
24 single community and the boundary trajectories that describe participation in multiple
25
26 communities. Boundary trajectories — described by Wenger (1998) as a form of
27
28 participation where value is located "in spanning boundaries and linking communities of
29
30 practice" (p.154) — are particularly salient for understanding the learning of senior
31
32 professional public relations practitioners. Identity is a key element of Wenger's account of
33
34 community of practice as a unit of analysis and for those with boundary trajectories,
35
36 "sustaining an identity across boundaries is one of the most delicate challenges of this kind
37
38 of brokering work" (p. 154). Edwards' (2010) work on becoming an expert professional also
39
40 suggests that a professional trajectory locates the insider only at the midway point and the
41
42 move to expert requires the development of autonomy beyond the boundaries of specific
43
44 organisational and knowledge domains.
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1
2
3 In her critique of existing models of professional development, Webster-Wright (2009)
4
5
6 claims little is known about how professionals continue to learn throughout their working
7
8
9 lives. Education and learning in the context of the professional project has thus far focused
10
11 on the identification of appropriate bodies of abstract knowledge (DiStasio et al, 2009; Fitch,
12
13 2014) and educational or training programmes which instil this knowledge into individual
14
15
16 practitioners under the eye of the master, a more senior practitioner or teacher who guides
17
18
19 the learner through this process (Pieczka, 2002). This view of learning, however, becomes
20
21
22 problematic when it comes to practitioners who have attained more senior positions or
23
24
25 levels of practice and thus may struggle to identify the resources they need to develop their
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The professional peer group has an important role to play in supporting the professional learning of novice practitioners and scaffolding the movement from the periphery to the inside. The scaffolding metaphor refers to the Vygotskian idea of learning as a supported movement through each individual's 'zone of proximal development' and the process of mentoring might usefully be thought of in this way. However, there is a gap in understanding about the knowledge and learning required for senior professional public relations practice. If it is the act of changing participation in the culturally designed settings of everyday life that provokes learning (Lave, 2008) and if seniority is a more complex and autonomous phenomenon that cannot be scaffolded like the progression from novice to insider, how do senior public relations practitioners account for performance of their boundary identity? This preliminary analysis suggests that while the inbound trajectory and the insider identity are reasonably clearly supported through workplace structures (enabling

1
2
3 communities of practice to develop within departments or teams), senior practitioners
4
5
6 seem to operate in multidisciplinary communities of practice (typically with senior managers
7
8 or important organisational stakeholders) thus on the boundary between their own core
9
10 community and other constellations. This can be illustrated in the interview material shown
11
12 earlier which makes distinctions between craft work and strategic work, in references to
13
14 networking and making intellectual connections between problems, bodies of knowledge,
15
16 and solutions encountered in different contexts.
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25 The picture emerging from this discussion of knowledge and learning has brought the
26
27 argument to the point where senior practitioners need to be understood as functioning in
28
29 two ways. In the core public relations communities of practice they function as community
30
31 insiders in terms of their role in scaffolding the learning of community entrants and mid-
32
33 level specialists. For senior practitioners' own learning however, they need to be
34
35 understood as functioning in constellations of practices. The concluding section offers an
36
37 outline of such an approach.
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47 **Some conclusions about senior-level learning: from boundary spanning to boundary** 48 49 **dwelling** 50

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52 In presenting this account of the way in which a particular theoretical approach has been
53
54 combined with supporting empirical evidence to explore the nature of what is commonly
55
56 referred to as senior-level public relations practice and knowledge, a number of provisional
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58 conclusions can be drawn that are presented in this final section of the paper.
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7 A broadly socio-cultural approach to learning may be fruitful in developing an understanding
8
9 of professional seniority in public relations and senior-level practice. It has helped to
10
11 highlight a gap in understanding what senior practitioners know and how they learn in
12
13 relation to how they practice. It is argued here that the use of concepts such as community
14
15 of practice, and specifically core community of practice, is useful for understanding the
16
17 relationship between the context of organisational public relations practice and the
18
19 individual development of professional knowledge and repertoire. At the same time,
20
21 however, this article argues that of itself the concept has insufficient explanatory power for
22
23 understanding how the knowledge and skills required at senior level are developed. Here
24
25 the article suggests that by focusing on the constellations of practices (Wenger, 1998) in
26
27 which senior members participate it might be possible to account for senior level learning
28
29 and map multiple trajectories of participation, including illegitimate peripheral participation,
30
31 and learning that happens in these contexts. It enables a conceptualisation of the
32
33 development of senior practice not as a vertical step leading to a higher stage or level but
34
35 more “a terrain of activity to be dwelled in and explored, not just a stage to be achieved or
36
37 even a space to be crossed” (Engestrom, 2009, p. 312). In this way, attention is drawn to
38
39 the importance of leveraging its emergence in multiple communities for the purposes of
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41 learning.
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56 Although it has not been possible to develop this part of the discussion in this article,
57
58 combining ideas about “knowledge activity” or “knowing in action” (Amin and Roberts,
59
60 2008), Engestrom’s (2008) “collaborative community”, and Edwards’s (2009, 2010)

1
2
3 “relational practice” offers a potentially fruitful way forward. The first of these argues
4
5
6 against the over-simplistic treatment of knowledge and offers a typology of different kinds
7
8 of knowledge (and learning) relevant to professional action (craft or task-based knowing;
9
10 epistemic or high creativity knowing; professional knowing; and virtual knowing to do with
11
12 relationships) combined with and argument for the need to distinguish between them at the
13
14 analytical level. This, in turn, directs attention to the importance of collaboration in creating
15
16 knowledge *and* learning. Finally, Edwards draws attention to an increasingly pressing need
17
18 for practitioners to be able to make their specialist knowledges and practices visible to
19
20 themselves as well as others, but subject to negotiation if they are to create new knowledge
21
22 in collaboration with other practitioners with shared interests. Autonomy therefore, and
23
24 professional seniority, might be thought of more usefully as neither a property of the
25
26 individual or the organisation but a product of the community of practice through which
27
28 (rather than in which) it was created. Consequently, further research is needed to explore
29
30 the following two questions that arise at this point: What type of knowledge community is
31
32 this? What are the shared interests of senior PRPs?
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45 This article argues that senior practitioners pose a particular problem to existing
46
47 explanations of public relations knowledge and learning: this research has found indications
48
49 of loneliness, a sense of a disorientation, and a yearning for definitive answers as to what
50
51 senior practitioners need to know, as well as a perception that they are not catered for in
52
53 terms of training and development by their professional organisations:
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3 I don't think the profession has sufficiently communicated itself as an actual
4
5 generator of ideas as opposed to the seller of ideas [Director, National
6
7
8 Representative Organisation]
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15 ...to some extent the industry in Scotland as well as elsewhere is guilty of
16
17 perpetuating a very narrow perception of what PR is [Director, National Public
18
19 Relations Organisation]
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22

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26
27 I'm not sure it's a matter of going on a course ... sometimes it is literally lived
28
29 breadth of experience [and] quite a depth of knowledge [Director, National Public
30
31 Relations Organisation]
32
33
34

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37
38 I mean I had probably thought the CIPR would have more of a space for that
39
40 [reflexive practices]. I don't find they have [Communications Manager, National
41
42 Charity]
43
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49
50 The experiences of senior practice, and of dwelling in the boundaries of constellations of
51
52 practices, is often felt as individual deficit and a challenge to the legitimacy of seniority "I
53
54 think I'm going to be found out any day" (Communications Manager, National Charity). This
55
56 article argues however, that these experiences should be reinterpreted as positive, i.e. they
57
58 need to be understood and accepted as a fundamental presence: being a senior public
59
60

1
2
3 relations practitioner means operating outside the comfort of one's single community of
4
5
6 practice and requires leveraging different contexts of practice for the job of constant
7
8 knowledge creation. Rather than boundary spanning, therefore, senior practice might more
9
10 usefully be thought of as boundary dwelling and its practitioners constituted as boundary
11
12 learners. In this formulation, senior practitioner learning requires moving beyond the
13
14 comfort of the core of the public relations community, to participate on the peripheries of
15
16 other knowledges, practices and organisational domains in environments of mutual trust. It
17
18 may be useful therefore, to move away from the idea that the uncertainties experienced by
19
20 senior practitioners implies deficit and to embrace instead the legitimacy of those
21
22 peripheral participations beyond reified boundaries.
23
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33 It seems appropriate to finish by echoing Webster-Wright (2010) in the call for a model of
34
35 authentic professional development that supports self-directed learning predicated on
36
37 questions of ontology (What *is* this I am doing?) and professional identity (where does what
38
39 I am currently doing belong?), one that listens to the experiences of practices. The view of
40
41 senior practitioners as boundary dwellers put forward in this articles suggests that
42
43 appropriate professional development for senior practitioners may need to look very
44
45 different to that offered to other types of practitioners, such as novices or insiders (entry
46
47 and mid-level specialists). While learning for the latter groups can be scaffolded as
48
49 communication management-specific competences, learned in appropriate communities of
50
51 practice (work, training, education); senior level learning may require "inner" scaffolding, a
52
53 high level of reflexivity that recognises it is their participation in the different constellations
54
55 of practices that creates new knowledges. This, in turn, can be seen to involve perspective
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1
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3 shifting achieved through internalised or externalised ways. The first can be understood as a
4
5
6 capacity for disciplined observation and inquiry that can be developed with the help of
7
8 appropriate tools for the development of professional reflexivity (different forms of writing
9
10 being perhaps the most obvious suggestion); the second refers to learning of a dialogic type,
11
12 prompted by external inputs in appropriately structured small group simulations,
13
14 discussions or mentoring sessions that rely on listening, curiosity and open engagement
15
16 with the other. Senior level learning, thus, requires environments of high levels of trust to
17
18 be created so that barriers created by professional competition or fear of reputational risk
19
20 can removed.
21
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30 Finally, it could also be argued that appropriate provision needs to be made for concept-led
31
32 learning as this is fundamental to the creation of a body of professional knowledge (Pieccka
33
34 and Powell, 2016) whether one works within its boundaries or across them. This has a
35
36 number of consequences. Firstly, attention is drawn to the responsibility of the professional
37
38 group to promote higher order thinking across constellations of practices rather than on
39
40 problem-solving in professional/organisational practice. Secondly, there is a need for
41
42 spaces that offer the opportunities for concept-led learning in reflexive environments where
43
44 boundaries can be explored and uncertainty is valued (through academic research for
45
46 example).
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57 Senior professional learning requires a mechanism for creating shared identity and a shared
58
59 enterprise despite the strong centrifugal force created by the permanent positioning of
60

1
2
3 professional seniority in multiple practice spaces. Here the role of professional associations
4
5
6 can be particularly important in enabling senior practitioners to be seen as those with the
7
8 power to enable the novice and insider learning trajectories and to articulate the
9
10 appropriate professional standards for these practitioners. More importantly perhaps,
11
12 professional associations should develop a new model of learning that enables senior
13
14 practitioners to function autonomously as boundary learners who create new knowledges
15
16 and practices in the liminal spaces of their everyday professional lives. This perhaps, is the
17
18 most useful senior competence of them all.
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