

Pedagogies and Learning in Cooperative and Symbolic Communities of Practice: Implications for and from the Education of Australian Show People

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Abstract

Groups and organisations are not automatically sites of effective and transformative pedagogy and learning; such outcomes are most likely to occur when entities become communities of practice (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). One conception of community focused explicitly on the facilitation of pedagogy and learning is cooperative community, centred on five principles (Johnson & Johnson, 1998). Another productive notion of community is as a symbolic construction, centred on members' shared consciousness and boundary maintenance (Cohen, 1985).

One community that demonstrates the pedagogical and learning potential of cooperative and symbolic communities of practice is the Australian show people (Danaher, 1998, 2001). Following generations of educational marginalisation, this community participated in a specialised program within the Brisbane School of Distance Education between 1989 and 1999, and since 2000 its members have benefited from having their own Queensland School for Travelling Show Children, established under Education Queensland's auspices.

This paper maps and portrays enactments of the cooperative and symbolic communities of practice in the school and on the show circuits. It identifies specific strategies that underpin the pedagogies and learning made possible in those communities of practice, and it considers possible implications of such pedagogies and learning for other educational contexts and groups.

Introduction

Since the publication of Benedict Anderson's seminal work *Imagined Communities* (1983), it has been accepted as almost a truism that members of particular groups often have very strong feelings of identification and association with one another for reasons that have little to do with geographical proximity or other elements of empirical 'fact'. Those feelings have been generally connected with such discourses

as nationalism and religion. More recently, Scott Durham has referred to *Phantom Communities* (1998), which some commentators might perceive as the 'logical extreme' of the postmodernist separation of the image from its referent. Thus Durham identified "the quintessentially postmodern myth...of a society that exists only in and for its own spectacle" (p. 5).

The notion of communities of practice (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002) is helpful in linking this important conceptual work about communities with the empirically grounded and no less significant work of pedagogies and learning. In particular, communities of practice are useful in demonstrating how education is situated in particular contexts, and the conditions in those contexts most likely to facilitate effective pedagogies and learning. These conditions might be argued to include the propositions that such contexts – and communities of practice – are collaborative rather than competitive, constructive rather than destructive, functional rather than dysfunctional and inclusive rather than exclusive.

This paper deploys two specific concepts of community to contribute to the theorisation of communities of practice in relation to these conditions for effective pedagogies and learning. One concept focuses on communities as sites of cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1998). The other concept concentrates on communities as symbolic constructions (Cohen, 1985). These two ideas of community have in common a commitment to deploying a microscope of reflexive self-examination in order for community members to make their own meanings of what they have achieved and aspire to achieve in the future. In combination, these two concepts highlight several crucial dimensions of the pedagogical and learning elements of communities of practice.

The paper illustrates those dimensions through an account of the formal and informal educational experiences of Australian show people. The formal experiences are centred on the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children, formed in 2000. The informal experiences are filtered through the many ways in which show people learn the intricacies of their employment and way of life. The account is drawn from a larger corpus of semi-structured interviews in August 2003 with 20 show children, six parents and nine officers from the school and Education Queensland (see Moriarty, Danaher, Kenny & Danaher, 2004).

Several of these interviews, together with the observations made on site, provide deeper insights into the educational experiences of the children than could be provided through the results of formal testing. The interviews were conducted by the researchers over a period of one week. The researchers travelled to a site that was in fairly close proximity to the two settings in which the interviews took place, to accommodate the commitments of the study's participants. Interviews ranged from those that were conducted with all four researchers present talking with one or more participants to one-to-one interviews, depending on the availability of the participants.

By spending up to a week in interviewing, the researchers were able to immerse themselves more into the routines and responsibilities of the participants. Through travelling to and from the site in pairs at the beginning and end of the research period respectively, and by all four researchers meeting in the evenings, the research team

members were able to spend considerable time discussing their approach, listening to taped interviews and triangulating their understandings arising from the interviews.

Informed by those interviews, the paper maps and portrays enactments of the cooperative and symbolic communities of practice in the school and on the show circuits. In doing so, it identifies specific strategies that underpin the pedagogies and learning made possible in those communities of practice. For Australian show people and the Queensland show school, meanings that reinforce the transformative power of cooperative and symbolic communities of practice emerge from the microscope of their reflexive self-examination.

The paper concludes by considering possible implications of the show people's pedagogies and learning, framed through their cooperative and symbolic communities of practice, for other educational contexts and groups. The meanings that emerge from the microscope of the show people's reflexive self-examination highlight the transformative power of such communities of practice and help to delineate some of the key features of effective pedagogies and learning, both on and off the showgrounds.

Pedagogies and Learning in Cooperative Communities of Practice

Johnson and Johnson (1998) identified the concept of cooperative community, together with constructive conflict and civic values, as an essential element of the effective management of schools and classrooms. The principles of cooperative community derive from the extensive and conclusive body of research into the pedagogical aspects of cooperative learning and comprise positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotion of one another's success, interpersonal and small group skills and group processing or reflection. Further, schools that wish to create and promote their sites as cooperative communities need to ensure that the principle of positive interdependence is implemented at each level within the school, from groups within and between classes to the wider school community, including parents and neighbours. In complex communities, it takes time to build trust among different sub-groups, particularly if those groups have different agendas that are not necessarily explicit (Moriarty, 2004). Australian shows are examples of complex communities.

Positive interdependence, in the Johnson and Johnson (1998) conception, is a complex construct that is enacted through the sharing of mutual goals and resources as well as rewards and identity. A crucial element of positive interdependence that distinguishes the cooperative environment from a competitive or individualistic learning environment, however, is the presence of complementary roles. These roles are most apparent when people take on different roles that complement one another to the extent that mutual goals cannot be achieved if the enactment of even one role is absent or inadequate, thus pointing to the second principle, that of individual accountability.

The interrelationship between positive interdependence and individual accountability is both logical and transparent when people take on different but complementary roles that are essential for the group to succeed. If two people were performing exactly the same role at the same time, however, the element of individual accountability would not be as obvious and conceivably the group could achieve its goal without input from

one or more of its members.

While they may not appear as quite so central to a cooperative community, the next two principles, the promotion of one another's success and the use of interpersonal and small group skills, are crucial. The former involves members assisting and encouraging one another and the latter emphasises the development of trust-building, conflict management, communication, leadership and decision-making skills. Interpersonal and small group skills such as these appear with different emphases and perspectives in the literature but the research into cooperative community clearly places them at the same level of importance as each of the four other principles.

It could be argued that the principle that has received the least attention in the research is group processing, or reflection (Moriarty, 2000, p. 300). It is possibly the principle to receive the least attention in the classroom as well. This may be because time needs to be allowed at crucial stages in the learning cycle for groups to reflect on the extent to which they are achieving their goals and on the effectiveness of their group processes.

Research into the Australian show community (Danaher, 1998, 2001; Moriarty, Danaher, Kenny & Danaher, 2004) interrogates the ways in which this community enacts the principles of cooperative community. It is anticipated that the long-term survival and success of organisations such as the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children – and the effectiveness of the associated pedagogies and learning – will depend on a continued commitment to the principles of cooperative community.

Pedagogies and Learning in Symbolic Communities of Practice

Cohen's (1985) depiction of communities as symbolic constructions (see also Smith, 2005) was a reaction against the structuralist orientation that had held sway in British and American anthropology and sociology in the 1960s and 1970s. He contended that, rather than being a structural abstraction, "community...hinges crucially on consciousness", which is "encapsulated in perception of its boundaries, boundaries which are themselves largely constituted by people in interaction" (p. 13). Such interaction alerted people to inordinate variations on understandings of what the community means to its members. For Cohen, "In the face of this variability of meaning, the consciousness of community has to be kept alive through manipulation of its symbols" (p. 15). Furthermore, his insistence that "Community exists in the minds of its members, and should not be confused with geographic or sociographic assertions of 'fact'" (p. 98) accords with Anderson's (1983) identification of communities as 'imagined' entities.

This crucial point brings into play the third of the three key elements underpinning Cohen's (1985) theory. These three elements are community, boundary and symbolism. According to Cohen, "People construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a reference of their identity" (p. 118). Moreover, "the opposition of one community to others or to other social entities" (p. 12) indicates that what holds one community together separates it from other communities. Smith (2005) interprets this as highlighting the point that community "implies both similarity and difference" and that "It is a relational idea" (n.p.).

This reference to “both similarity and difference” is a salutary reminder that community as an idea(l) can function both constructively and destructively. The latter can occur when communities become fixated on the perceived opposition between ‘in groups’ and ‘out groups’, celebrating the diversity of the former while homogenising and demonising the latter. While the authors recognise this potential ‘dark side’ of symbolic communities, their interest here lies in understanding how the show people’s formal and informal pedagogies and learning are facilitated within a symbolic community of practice.

From that perspective, there are two distinct levels at which the combination of community, boundary and symbolism applies to the Australian show people. Firstly, they are a highly differentiated and disparate collection of individuals, families and groups with considerable internal heterogeneity. This situation contrasts with local people’s construction of them as ‘show people’, implying a single and homogeneous community and an impenetrable boundary between ‘us’ (local people) and ‘them’ (show people). The result is the need for the show people to use multiple symbols, both to draw attention to and celebrate their show identities, and to re-express important internal differences among themselves. In this context, the authors endorse Cohen’s (1985) assertion that “the ‘commonality’ which is found in community need not be a uniformity....It is a commonality of *forms* (ways of behaving) whose content (meanings) may vary considerably among its members” (p. 20; emphasis in original).

Secondly, community, boundary and symbolism also come into operation in relation to the show people’s interactions with non-show people at a broader level of operations. That is, they need to use symbols to negotiate their preferred means of dealing with local people in ways that preserve their livelihood (through reinforcing the idea that sideshow alley has value and meaning for new generations of participants) while dispelling at least some of the stereotypes attached to show people. In other words, symbols can function both to explicate and to contest – or at least make less rigid – the boundary between show and local people. From this perspective, the authors support Cohen’s (1985) reference to “the axiom that people become aware of their culture when they stand at its boundaries: when they encounter other cultures, or when they become aware of other ways of doing things....Such awareness is a necessary precondition for the valuing of culture and community” (p. 69).

The potential implications of this interest in the connections among community, boundary and symbolism in relation to Australian show people for understanding pedagogies and learning in communities of practice are significant in at least two ways. Firstly, these connections encourage the authors to investigate the various meanings that show people attach to the multiple symbols that they encounter both on the showgrounds and in the ‘outside world’, as their means of making sense of their lives. These symbols exist not only in the formal schooling experiences of the children but also in the informal learnings that constitute ‘the hidden curriculum’ for their parents and themselves.

Secondly, the authors consider it vital to map or trace how the meanings that the show people attach to the symbols that they encounter strengthen, or alternatively challenge and contest, their developing understandings of communities – both the show community and the community of the ‘outside world’. In this way, the authors can discern how the show people learn to construct, and potentially seek to reconstruct,

the boundaries between themselves and non-show people. From this perspective, education can function as both a microcosm of broader interactions of community, boundary and symbolism and a site of potential change to, and transformation of, those interactions.

Cooperative and Symbolic Communities of Practice Among Australian Show People

The paper turns now to consider in detail how the Australian show people constitute cooperative and symbolic communities of practice, using the dedicated mobile school and the show circuits as separate but interrelated examples. As indicated above, the focus is on identifying some of the specific strategies underpinning the pedagogies and learning that are made possible in those communities of practice, and thereby on explicating the meanings that reinforce the transformative power of those communities of practice emerging from the microscope of their reflexive self-examination.

From that perspective, the principles of cooperative community can be understood as providing symbolic resources (language, literacy, design skills and so forth) with which to communicate the sustaining meanings and values of the community. Positive interdependence is evident in the part that different groups – parents, teachers, administrative and technical staff, students and educational bureaucrats – have played in the establishment and running of the show school. As these groups work according to different but convergent interests, priorities, protocols and procedures, they practise a degree of autonomy and flexibility. Indeed, teachers stressed that standard school routines had to be adjusted to take account of the circumstances under which the school operated – for example, having classes at weekends to make up for school time spent travelling from one location to another. This interdependent and flexible spirit not only contributes to keeping the school on the road, but also serves to challenge the symbolic boundaries of schooling itself, so that the standard practices and procedures that apply to sedentary schools need adjusting to accommodate such learning on the run. In other words, pedagogies and learning must be situated and customised if they are to be effective in the context of the communities of practice at which they are directed.

In another example of this situatedness and customisation, teachers at the school talked of the role of literacy testing, which was geared towards assessing the children's reading and writing against state wide standards. While this procedure might be regarded as individual accountability in relation to the provision of core skills of symbolic construction, it should be viewed in the wider context of the show people's literacy development. While teachers spoke of parents expressing frustration at the children continuing to lag behind state standards in reading and writing, the enthusiasm that the authors observed the children display in their reading groups, and the dramatic transformation that the principal observed in the children's attitudes towards reading, provide a different perspective from which to promote the school's success.

Such a commitment to literacy helps to augment the already impressive verbal communication and interpersonal skills that the show community demonstrates through spruiking for business, interacting with the public and, indeed, agitating for

the dedicated mobile school in the first place. It is evident here how the school acts as a cooperative community to 'add value' to the symbolic resources of the show culture. The group processing and reflection are expressed in the community's consciousness of the significant role that the school fulfils for the show people, and the transformation that it has made in their lives. In this way, pedagogies and learning must work to cross borders (Giroux, 1992; Giroux & McLaren, 1994) and disrupt binaries, such as those positioning 'work' as opposed and in many ways superior to 'home', 'public' to 'private', 'formal' to 'informal' and 'settled' to 'itinerant'. For the show people (as for many other so-called marginalised communities), meaning-making occurs along the boundaries of those separations, and pedagogies and learning must follow suit if they are to be authentic, effective and transformative.

As an example of an educational institution contributing to that process of helping communities to make meaning, the school has both articulated with and enriched the show people's symbolic construction of their community. The design of the school logo, emblazoned on the mobile classrooms as they are transported around the country from school to school, asserts the identity and mobility of the community of which the school is a part. This logo also features on the school uniform of the children. The principal indicated that members of the show community were involved in, and conscious of the significance of, the design of the uniform, for example, avoiding the colour green, which is considered unlucky on the showgrounds. The sense of symbolic unity is also expressed in the school song, which is sung to the theme tune of the television series *Rush*, which is recognised as a traditional Australian piece of music with links to the colonial period. Here formal, school-based pedagogies and learning have been allied with the informal learning that occurs on the show circuits in ways that celebrate and value both forms and kinds of education.

A crucial dimension of these pedagogies and learning is their political valence. That is, in keeping with the show community's ambivalent and in many ways marginalised position in Australia, the pedagogies and learning involved in facilitating their children's meaning-making are directed partly at engaging with that ambivalence and marginalisation. Certainly the show children were conscious of negative symbolic constructions of their identity, and reported the pain of being labelled such terms as 'carnies' by local children. At the same time, there were conscious attempts to incorporate the show school children into the local school and *vice versa*, in order to challenge these symbolic boundaries between the two groups. In this context, situating the mobile classrooms in the grounds of local schools (rather than at an alternative venue such as the showgrounds) was significant. It meant that local school children could tour the classrooms and gain an insight into this different style of schooling, while the show children were able to play games and interact with the locals. It also meant that the show children were absorbed into the symbolic world of the school, with its rituals, routines, roles and responsibilities. There is a sense in which school acts as a democracy in which individual and cultural differences are effaced – at least to some extent – in favour of the school community dynamic.

At the same time, and by contrast, the show school teachers spoke of a resolve to incorporate the history and heritage of the show community into the curriculum. In this way the symbolic consciousness of a distinctive community is passed on. Plans to introduce adult literacy classes for members of the show community who had had

limited educational opportunities can also be understood as a move to equip the community with the symbolic resources to sustain and enrich the consciousness of the community. Likewise, some participants spoke of the role of generating positive media coverage through the school. The school was proactive in promoting itself to local and national media as an innovative development supporting an enduring Australian cultural institution: the show people. Such media representation helps to challenge negative constructions of travelling communities.

Taken together, these strategies can be read as an ongoing contribution to the re-imagining of the symbolic boundaries between mobile and sedentary communities in a way that is mutually enabling. They demonstrate how a cooperative community can work together to generate the symbolic resources that, in the face of various challenges, can help to keep the show on the road. They identify also the crucial part played by authentic, effective and transformative pedagogies and learning in that generation.

Conclusion: Implications for Other Educational Contexts and Groups

What does this account of pedagogies and learning and meaning-making manifested in the cooperative and symbolic communities of practice exhibited by the Australian show people, both in the show school and along the show circuits, have to say for other educational contexts and groups? While several implications can be identified, three seem most pressing and salient at this juncture.

Firstly, the interplay of the cooperative (Johnson & Johnson, 1998) and the symbolic (Cohen, 1985) dimensions of communities of practice (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002) has been instructive. In particular, the emphasis by symbolic communities on 'self' and 'otherness' has been a helpful antidote to the potential political *naïveté* and neutrality of cooperative communities, while the five principles of cooperative communities render timely assistance to symbolic communities whose construction might rest on idolising 'self' while demonising 'other'. This conceptual framework is therefore both politically nuanced and geared towards productive change and transformation. Accordingly it could usefully be deployed in examining educational communities of practice – particularly in relation to their claimed and actual effectiveness – across a wide range of contexts and situations.

Secondly, the meaning-making in which the show people along their circuits and the children, teachers and administrators in the show school engage has clearly defined cultural, economic, political and social characteristics. There are thus direct links between the show people's circumstances and lived experiences and the kinds of meanings that they make in and from those circumstances and experiences on the one hand, and between the show children's formal and informal education and their life aspirations and chances on the other. If education is to contribute effectively and productively to the meaning-making of different individuals and groups, it must be directed at understanding – and where appropriate contesting – the cultural, economic, political and social domains in which such meaning-making is enacted.

Thirdly, the pedagogies and learning identified in this paper are hardly new or revolutionary; they could be depicted variously as 'authentic learning' (Cronin, 1993; Newman & Associates, 1996), 'experiential learning' (Kolb, 1984; Weil & McGill, 1989), 'situated learning' (Anderson, Reder & Simon, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991) and variations on those terms. At the same time, the deployment of such pedagogies and learning is neither easy nor automatic. Like most other mobile communities, the show people have experienced generations of educational and social marginalisation and it is only relatively recently that their formal education has been brought into alignment with the patterns and rhythms of their informal education. The point to emphasise here is that pedagogies and learning require considerable reflexivity, commitment and sometimes political activism if they are genuinely to contribute to the fulfilment and transformation of their intended beneficiaries.

From the perspective of these three key implications for other educational contexts and groups, the meanings that have emerged from the microscope of the show people's reflexive self-examination have highlighted the transformative power of their cooperative and symbolic communities of practice. This point underscores the assertion made at the beginning of this paper: that groups and organisations are not automatically the sites of effective pedagogies and learning. On the contrary: the show people's previous experiences resonate with what many individuals and communities have found: that educational provision can be profoundly alienating, disempowering and marginalising. In this case, the show people and the staff members of the Queensland School for Travelling Show People have worked long and hard in the material context of the show circuits to create communities of practice that facilitate and support a very different and much more engaged and productive kind of educational provision. The new meanings that have emerged as a result of this ongoing process have served also to delineate some of the key features of effective pedagogies and learning, both on and off the showgrounds.

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