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Microcultures and informal learning: a heuristic guiding analysis of conditions for informal learning in local higher education workplaces

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This article contributes to knowledge about learning in workgroups, so called *microcultures* in higher education. It argues that socially constructed and institutionalised traditions, recurrent practices, and tacit assumptions in the various microcultures influence academic teachers towards certain behaviour. In line with this perspective, we present a heuristic with the potential to differentiate various types of microcultures: the commons, the market, the club, and the square. The heuristic is based on a socio-cultural perspective and research on collective action. Its purpose is to assist academic developers to fine-tune their approaches while engaging with colleagues, but also to aid further inquiry into how institutionalised norms and traditions influence academic teaching and student learning.

Keywords: academic development; informal learning; microcultures; workplace learning

Introduction

For decades, academic developers have organised formal learning opportunities for academic teachers, for example in the format of courses and workshops. Academic developers have also engaged themselves in development projects and worked strategically together with various leaders and managers in higher education institutions (Gibbs, 2013). These activities have been evaluated (Chalmers, Stoney, Goody, Goerke, & Gardiner, 2012; Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Prosser, Rickinson, Bence, Hanbury, & Kulej, 2006) in search of meaningful impact on academic teaching and subsequent student learning. Time after time these evaluations have shown that the impact is in no way straightforward. Instead, there appear to be informal structures in the various contexts where academic teachers are active that mediate the impact (Trowler, 2008).

Ginns, Kitay, and Prosser (2010) illustrate this by presenting a story about two former participants in a graduate certificate in higher education as they return to their day-to-day practice. Both had become inspired during the programme but experienced different trajectories when they returned to their workplaces. One teacher, called Anne, returned to a workplace where colleagues showed interest in her new ideas and made use of them. The other teacher, Belinda, suffered from uninterested

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and even hostile colleagues. Due to this, the inspiration she experienced during the programme fades away. The story illustrates how often institutionalised social phenomena in a workplace can influence the outcome of formal training organised by academic developers.

Anne and Belinda belong to different microcultures, a unifying term for culturally formed organisational entities (Alvesson, 2002; Schein, 2004) like workgroups, workplaces, programme boards, departments, sub-departments, disciplinary communities, and the like. As our previous research has shown (Mårtensson, 2014; Roxå, 2014; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2011, 2014), microculture as a term emphasises the social nature of these places and summarises the processes of members as they are engaged in everyday practices that develop habits and traditions, that is cultural features that will, over time, influence them towards certain behaviour (Jawitz, 2009; Trowler, 2008). Through these processes, a microculture becomes something for members to identify with, for good or bad. A microculture will become visible in the organisation and possible to identify with the phrase, 'That's how they do things over there.' The term sub-culture is avoided since it signals subordination and thereby diminishes the degree of independence often experienced by the members (Neame, 2013). We argue that an improved understanding of the various types of microcultures is productive for academic developers.

The article starts by outlining a perspective on informal learning and institutionalisation of practices in higher education organisations. We then construct a heuristic model through the framework of communities of practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1999) and commons (Ostrom, 1990). The heuristic describes different types of microcultures as a function of trust, a sense of shared responsibility, and a developmental agenda. Finally, implications for academic development are discussed.

Informal learning and microcultures

The difference between formal and informal learning has been summarised in the context of learning how to play an instrument as *either you learn how to play* or *you play* and learn while you do it (Folkestad, 2006). Eraut characterises informal learning through the 'absence of a teacher' (Eraut, 2004, p. 250). It is often unplanned and implies a 'greater flexibility or freedom for learners' (ibid., 2004, p. 247). But Eraut also stresses the crucial role of reflection during informal learning and points out that 'most models of experiential learning assume that this further reflection will happen, but that will depend on the disposition of the learner.' (Eraut, 1994, p. 107). In this paper, we argue that this disposition to reflect critically during informal learning does not depend solely on individual disposition, as highlighted by Eraut; it is also dependent on traditions, norms, and habits in the respective local context.

The contexts we focus upon are *microcultures* within the meso level of higher education organisations (Mårtensson, 2014; Roxå, 2014; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2011). The meso-level refers to the mid-level in the organisations, hierarchically situated between the individuals and the senior management (Hannah & Lester, 2009). In focus are the teaching and learning aspects of microcultures, that is, their *teaching and learning regimes* (Trowler, 2008); these are culturally constructed structures that include norms, traditions, recurrent practices, tacit assumptions, and so on, that stabilise a microculture and influence its members towards certain behaviour.

Interest in how local working contexts influence teaching and student learning in higher education dates back to the 1970s, when Ramsden (1979) reported on the link between students' learning and their perception of the atmosphere in the department where they studied. More recent research has also included how the local climate of the workplace influences academics and their development (Christensen & Lund, 2014; Deneen & Boud, 2014; Gibbs, Knapper, & Piccinin, 2008; Jawitz, 2009; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2011; Walsh, 2010).

Thomson (2013) reports on the function of day-to-day conversations among academic teachers: to vent, to reassure themselves, to manage, improve, and evolve their teaching. We have also investigated the nature of such conversations (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009) and found that academic teachers talk differently to different colleagues. Academics have more frequent, sincere, and emotionally dense personal conversations with a small number of trusted and *significant* (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) colleagues. The results reported suggest that it is during these *significant conversations* that ideas are tried out and problems are solved. Thus, not every informal conversation supports learning about teaching and student learning in the same way; instead, the nature of these conversations varies. In addition, we have shown (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009) that there is a link between how members perceive their respective microculture and the number of significant relationships they have. The more a workplace supports conversations about teaching and student learning, the more significant colleagues a teacher has within that context, and vice versa. This implies further exploration of how institutionalised structures in various microcultures support and influence informal learning during day-to-day interaction.

These results from mainly qualitative research are confirmed by quantitative studies on academic networks (Pataraia, Falconer, Margaryan, Littlejohn, & Fincher, 2014; Pyörälä, E. Personal Communication, May 27, 2014) and in more general network research. Network research repeatedly shows that individuals do form clusters signified by *strong ties* – emotionally dense and frequent internal communication. These clusters are linked together by so called *weak ties* – less emotionally dense and less frequent interaction (Barabási, 2003; Cross & Parker, 2004; Watts, 2003).

For academic developers, this pattern of strong and weak ties can have huge implications, as shown by Roxå, Mårtensson, and Alveteg (2011) and Williams et al. (2013). Communication inside local clusters of colleagues, whether these are departments, disciplinary communities, educational programmes, or any other organisational entity, often have precedence over communication outside the clusters. During significant interactions – more emotionally dense and frequent – academics form their identities and beliefs during day-to-day activities inside the various microcultures to which they belong, a point also made by Knight (2006). During these processes, formal academic development activities can potentially support microcultures and their respective members to discern previously hidden aspects of the teaching and learning reality and provide a language suitable for communication inside and across microcultural boarders.

To further explore informal learning, at least two ways lie open for academic developers: either to investigate the informal conversations and their implications for professional learning and development of teaching; or to investigate the various microcultures where institutionalised norms and expectations frame and influence informal learning. Without favouring one alternative over the other, this specific paper is targeted towards the latter. It strives towards a deeper understanding of the

variation of microcultures that together make up the meso-level (Hannah & Lester, 2009) in higher education organisations.

Institutionalisation in higher education

The perspective outlined here rests on the assumption that there is a link between institutionalised norms, traditions, and expectations in academic working contexts and the informal conversations academic teachers have with each other. As mentioned above, there is a variation both in the number of significant others and the nature of the interactions in the various microcultures.

In line with this perspective on organisational culture (Alvesson, 2002; Schein, 2004; Trowler, 2008), several scholars have presented empirical research illustrating such processes in academia. Jawitz (2009) described how young academics learn how to assess students. Bloch (2008) studied how traditions framing conversations in academic lunch-rooms influence not only what is being talked about, that is, which arguments are valid during discussions, but also the level of appropriate emotional engagement. Edvardsson-Stiwne (2009) followed several cohorts of engineering students and described how they were influenced in similar ways and how, together with teachers, they participated in the maintenance of the culture and thereby contributed to stabilise traditions. Walsh (2010), and Christensen and Lund (2014), showed how the success of doctoral students depends on the climate in the local working contexts. The list of contributions can easily be made longer. Culturally formed structures influence academics and their understanding of teaching and learning. The informal and day-to-day conversations in which they engage are culturally framed.

However, it is easy to over-emphasise these structural elements. There is a difference between being influenced and being controlled. Knowledgeable agents always have the freedom to act individually, but due to the complexity of the social environment it is hard for them to overlook all possible consequences of their actions. This sometimes overwhelming complexity and the occasional negative outcomes result in actions that are mostly in line with the institutionalised expectations, a process called *structuration* (Giddens, 2004). Thus, individuals may occasionally act as knowledgeable agents and deviate from what is expected, but they cannot escape being influenced by the structures we concentrate on here.

Lastly, it is easy to perceive culturally formed structures as something relevant only for contexts where the same individuals co-exist over considerable time periods. However, accidental social interactions like riding an elevator together or encountering a stranger briefly in the street are also influenced by norms and shared expectations, as shown by Goffman (1966) in his book *Behaviour in public places.*

CoP and the commons

In our attempt to present a heuristic describing various types of academic microcultures, we will start by referring to two documented models for workgroups and collective actions: (1) *CoP* described by Wenger (1999, 2000; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Wenger & Snyder, 2000), frequently used in higher education research, and (2) the *commons* originating from Ostrom and colleagues (Ostrom, 1990, 2005; Poteete, Janssen, & Ostrom, 2010).

A CoP consists of individuals who share an interest or passion for something and pursue this collectively as an enterprise over time (Wenger et al., 2002). While they do so, they create a shared history, a 'trace of learning,' as Wenger puts it. In turn, and over time, the mutual engagement and the sometimes intense debates inside a CoP influence the members' identities and sense of belonging; they become more significant to each other. A CoP is built around an internal, self-chosen developmental agenda, an enterprise pursued by individuals who trust each other as they share an experience of responsibility for what they are engaged in. 'The strength of CoP is self-perpetuating. As they generate knowledge, they reinforce and renew themselves' (Wenger & Snyder, 2000, p. 143). These processes generate boundaries to other collegial contexts.

The research focusing on functioning commons and commons groups explores collective action and especially how individuals can collectively share responsibility for resources that could be easily overharvested and destroyed. At the heart of this research are the socially constructed and maintained norms, traditions, and various sanctions that contribute to productive collective action over time. Especially important is the level of trust displayed by members as they count on each other to take responsibility for and contribute to the maintenance, and occasionally also development, of a shared resource. The relevance for this perspective in higher education settings has been described by us earlier (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2014) where we demonstrate that academically strong microcultures display similar design principles as do well-functioning commons.

Both Wenger and Ostrom emphasise trust as an element within a CoP (Wenger, 1999) and a commons (Ostrom, 1990, 2005). Trust allows the members to engage in practice in elastic ways and offers the individual member a degree of freedom to continuously make decisions based on his or her experiences of the unique situation at hand without having to renegotiate rules with other members. Even though both a CoP and a commons have routines for sanctioning actions that violate norms developed by the members, these are rarely used (Janssen, Holahan, Lee, & Ostrom, 2010). According to both Ostrom and Wenger, a low-trust community will have to formalise (often in writing) rules for practices and thereby make the adaptation to unique circumstances harder. This necessity for practitioners to adapt elastically to unique circumstances has been emphasised by Schön (1983).

An experience of shared responsibility allows for and even encourages engagement in each other's doings. It is proper to inquire further into narratives told by colleagues and to challenge assumptions and interpretations. Both Wenger and Ostrom elaborate on the importance of this element.

What may distinguish a commons from a CoP is that a CoP always has an enterprise; it has an internal *developmental agenda*. In a commons, the members *may* or *may not* have a developmental agenda. Members of a functioning commons trust each other and share a sense of responsibility, just as members in a CoP; but, in a commons, these elements can be oriented towards maintenance and preservation as well as towards development (Ostrom, 1990). Therefore, because of its developmental agenda, CoP as a type of microculture can be described as a subcategory within the category of commons.

The heuristic

In the following section, we use the basic elements of working contexts identified above in CoP and commons and suggest a heuristic useful for further discussions about various types of microcultures in higher education and their respective influence on informal learning. We refer to *heuristic* as a working hypothesis, an informed construct pending further inquiry, a guide for future investigations, rather than a final conclusion in itself. Here, we follow Dewey (1910) and his description of systematic thinking. Such a heuristic, we argue, is useful for academic developers as they engage with academics or assess a higher education organisation and its different microcultures (Mårtensson, 2014; Roxå, 2014). In a long-term perspective, it has the potential to support the development of new academic development practices. Basic elements in the heuristic are the three discussed above in relation to CoP and commons: *trust, a shared responsibility,* and *a developmental agenda.*

Trust

This element is related to how members of a microculture view each other. Trusted members are more likely to be significant to each other. Moreover, microcultures that display norms supporting trust will allow members to adapt elastically to local circumstances and thereby both enhance the practice at hand as well as create a richer experience of the practice with subsequent positive potential for informal learning.

Shared responsibility

This aspect is related to the practice at hand. Do the individuals experience a shared responsibility for the practice or practices in which they engage? If they do, they are more likely to engage in each other's experiences and even to challenge each other. Thus, if a microculture includes norms supporting a shared responsibility, members are more likely to challenge each other and thereby influence informal learning differently than if this element is absent.

Developmental agenda

This aspect is related to the enterprise in CoP, that is, whether norms in a microculture influence members towards development or towards preservation. Norms supporting a developmental agenda influence each individual member towards 'how can we/I find ways to do better?'

As a next step, we combine *trust* and *shared responsibility* into a matrix displaying the resulting four ideal-types (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2014) of microcultures: the commons, the market, the club, and the square (Figure 1). The emerging types of microcultures will all be described below. The third dimension, *developmental agenda*, is then added since all four of the types, as we shall see, may display a developmental agenda or not. During the description, it should become clear that each type of microculture scaffolds different types of day-to-day conversations and thereby supports informal learning in different ways.

The commons. The term the commons 'originated in feudal England, where the "waste," or uncultivated land, of a lord's manor could be used for pasture and

	High level of trust High significance Strong ties Sense of belonging	*Low level of trust* Low significance Weak ties Sense of coexistence
Experience of a shared responsibility Do things together Negotiate what to do Are impacted by what the others do	**The Commons** Share a concern for a practice. Things are being negotiated in relation to the shared concern. An undertow of consensus. 'We're in this together.'	**The Market** Share a concern for a practice. Ideas compete. Things are negotiated with an undertow of conflict. Relationships are formalised through contracts. 'I look after myself.'
No experience of a shared responsibility Do things in parallel No negotiation No interference from the others	**The Club** Members are together without sharing a concern. Descriptions from practice are not challenged. Friendship and consensus is highest priority. 'We'll always support each other.'	**The Square** Members share a space with strangers with no collective concern. Things are negotiated only when necessary. Members enter into relationships and leave them continuously. 'Who are these people?'

Figure 1. Four basic types of microcultures where the variation emerges as a function of whether the members trust each other and whether they experience a shared responsibility for the practice at hand.

firewood by his tenants' (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2014). Here it relates to a group of individuals successfully sharing responsibility for an area. In this type of microculture, members trust each other and they experience a shared responsibility. Over time, they become more and more significant to each other, something that scaffolds a sense of belonging but also creates boundaries between microcultures. The level of trust and accompanying elasticity in relation to rules allows for on-going adaptation to circumstances. Due to the level of trust, the individual member is offered freedom during his or her engagement in the practice. On the other hand, the experience of a shared responsibility allows for members to interfere and even question actions and interpretations made by the other members. The overall experience is that 'we are all in this together.'

As for the developmental agenda, the commons will appear differently if it does or does not have an internal developmental agenda. If it does, it will be similar to a CoP. If it does not, if it is oriented towards maintenance and preservation, it will most likely be a place where members develop defensive discourse. Furthermore, because of the intense level of significance of the members to each other, the clear boundaries, and the allowance to interfere with each other's doings, a non-developmental commons will appear as a conservative place in an organisation, with most likely elaborated arguments for why their way of doing things is already the best way.

The market. (Connotations suggest a market place where individual shopkeepers sell things, but also a domain in an economic system). In the market, the members share concerns for the practice at hand, but, due to the low level of trust, the members become less significant to each other in the sense that what a member says does not necessarily affect the others. It is more about officially adapting to the fact that others think differently. Identities become self-centred and the individuals focus on their own interests; the atmosphere has an undertow of conflict. But, since the members share concerns, they will negotiate more or less explicit rules regulating what is appropriate to do and not to do. Because of the ever-changing reality, individual practitioners frequently have to choose between adapting to reality, and thereby breaking or modifying the rules on their own, or viewing rules as separate from the reality. Adaptation to reality, a kind of informal and individual learning, is kept secret because, if communicated, it would demand a series of negotiations of rules with the other members, an often daunting process. 'I look after myself' is a useful maxim.

If such a microculture has a developmental agenda, competition would be the leading ethic, not only about performing better during practice, but also in order to build alliances and power and thereby gain favourable positions during the inevitable and frequent negotiations of rules or even to make it possible to ignore existing rules. If there is no developmental agenda, the microculture will most certainly become divided. Members will concentrate on their own individual practice and keep individual learning hidden from the others.

The club. (The image of British upper class gentlemen's clubs during the eighteenth century inspires this metaphor). In the club, members trust each other but do not share a responsibility for a practice. They are significant to each other, but they will avoid critical inquiry into the various descriptions offered by the other members. Conflict is avoided, sometimes because of an experience of belonging to a group of peers or friends. 'We'll always support each other' is a frequently repeated mantra.

A club with a developmental agenda will focus on individual support and avoid critique. Therefore, the individual members may benefit from this safe environment and open up to more experienced members who in turn can offer support and mentorship. Such conversations can even fulfil a therapeutic purpose and thereby support individual growth. The experience of belonging and loyalty is salient under such circumstances. With a non-developmental agenda, a club can evolve into a space where anecdotes are told over and over again with the single purpose of securing consensus. Under such conditions, boredom may thrive and even develop into cynicism or a habit among members to slander those who do not belong to the microculture at hand.

The square. (A square is simply a place where people move about, minding their own business). In a way, this is a microculture where members are strangers to each other. They are neither significant to each other, nor do they share a sense of responsibility for a practice. Members enter into relationships and leave them continuously; they live and work in parallel to each other without interfering with each other. Negotiations are ad hoc and take place only when absolutely necessary.

With a developmental agenda, these conditions offer freedom for the individual as various identities can be tried out and ideas can be formulated without any history or obligations attached to them. Without the developmental agenda, the square as a

microculture can be a desolated bleak place where individuals are expected not to talk to each other. 'Who are these people?' will be a recurrent question.

Discussion and implications for academic development

The heuristic outlined here has some limitations. Heuristics are, by definition, simplifications of reality. Therefore, the four types of microcultures presented and discussed above may at best serve as ideal-types (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2014). Thus, even though it is based on research of various kinds, this heuristic does not mirror reality or any specific microculture; its aim is rather to guide perception and analysis of a messy organisational reality displayed in higher education.

Furthermore, heuristics are simplifications with a purpose of inspiring new observations and analysis of phenomena, but they are also dangerous. If they do not inspire anyone, they have failed at the outset. If they *do* inspire, the simplification may overrun reality, since several aspects of the phenomenon are left out. For example, the commons, where members trust each other and experience a shared responsibility, may appear as the most appealing of the four types. This does not mean, however, that everyone coming into contact with a commons necessarily shares this interpretation. Instead, it is likely that members of a commons are protective of its boundaries and highly selective while looking for new partners to collaborate with. During such processes, individuals who aspire to enter might be obstructed to do so, with potential experiences of being degraded. These processes have been discussed in relation to microcultures in higher education (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2011, 2014). Again, it calls for careful handling of the suggested heuristic.

Two out of three core concepts – trust and shared responsibility – are firmly based in socio-cultural research and research on collective action. The question of a developmental agenda, however, is a more complicated issue. As already pointed out by Webb (1996a, 1996b), *development* in relation to academic development is contaminated by ideology. Therefore, to anchor the model in such a problematic concept is risky. In an entire organisation, such as a university or a faculty/school, it is likely that several developmental agendas exist simultaneously. Therefore, it must be made clear that the *developmental agenda* in this text refers to an agenda formulated inside the microculture, by the members themselves. The critical feature is whether or not the members share a sense of a direction (similar to an enterprise in a CoP). The members themselves thereby own the direction of this development.

This text deals with teaching, a practice targeted towards student learning and personal development. But, academics are involved in many varied practices, and cultural elements in microcultures will therefore shift as the collective focus sways from one practice to another. Even though this denotes a limitation with the heuristic, it also points towards the need for more theorisation. The cultural complexity at play as microcultures deal with various practices is less investigated in higher education. This level of complexity calls for multiple approaches in research to come, just as argued by, among others, Poteete et al. (2010). Therefore, the heuristic presented here is to be acknowledged as one of many future iterations.

The heuristic in our view also has benefits. As earlier stated, the purpose with a heuristic is often to guide attention and to aid further analysis and discussion. Therefore, it has to be inspiring, that is, offer a new way of thinking. The model presented above aspires to such benefits. Arguably, this specific heuristic is more than a rule

of thumb since it is based in well established research traditions such as socio-cultural research (exemplified by Wenger, 1999) and research on collective action (exemplified by Poteete et al., 2010). Furthermore, its roots can be traced through the sociological history focusing on institutionalised practices and social facts (Aron, 1982). Much more recent is the research tradition that focuses on higher education organisations through a cultural perspective, with particular attention to the meso-level (for example, see Trowler, 2008).

For academic developers, the heuristic has the potential to contribute to further understanding of how various types of microcultures in the meso-level of higher education organisations influence the interactions between formal development activities and informal learning during day-to-day practices. It also highlights the fact that academic teachers will arrive at formal development activities from different cultural contexts, something that will influence their engagement.

For leaders, academic developers, and others who seek to influence academic teaching, the heuristic highlights aspects of institutionalised interaction in microcultures. This can guide attention and point towards previously hidden levers for change within and between microcultures (Mårtensson, 2014). For, as stated by Neame (2013), academic organisations 'tend to develop a faith in their own practice' making them reluctant to use experiences formulated by others (p. 331). The heuristic may thus generate insight into how this faith is maintained and thereby contribute to a developed understanding of an under-theorised area in higher education research (McKenzie, Alexander, Harper, & Anderson, 2005).

Perhaps the most important message from the above is a reminder that academic teaching is an extremely context-dependent practice. The process whereby students strive to master a discipline or a professional area is highly complex. The teachers' job is to support this complex process and to do so without losing sight of overarching values in academia, in their discipline/profession, and in society. Teaching is easier to perform for the individual teacher if the microculture to which he or she belongs supports learning about this practice through continuous adjustment to reality and through constructive sharing of new insights among colleagues.

Conclusion

This article has argued that informal learning in local workplaces is influenced by institutionalised traditions, norms, and recurrent actions that present themselves in the organisation as microcultures. Through the use of socio-cultural research and research on collective actions, two key aspects – trust and shared experience of responsibility – have been combined into a heuristic describing four basic types of microcultures: the commons, the market, the club, and the square. In a second stage, the element of existence or non-existence of an internal developmental agenda has been added. The result is a heuristic representing eight types of microcultures, all differentiated by norms influencing how members see each other, the practices in which they are engaged, and how they view the future.

The main message is that informal conversations and informal learning in microcultures are influenced by socio-culturally formed structures. Further investigations into formal academic development activities and its outcomes may benefit from this perspective.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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