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Thesis Chapter 5

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Chapter 5

Research Design

Chapter 5: Research Design

5 RESEARCH DESIGN

5.1 Overview

The focus of this study was on a community of trainers (Trainers’ Forum) spanning a field of practice rather than any individual organisation. The aim was to explore “what goes on around here” and to clarify how and why things happened the way they did in the community through theoretical and empirical study.

Focussing on the Training Forum (TF) enabled detailed examination of the activity system of trainers, and of the extent to which it made progress towards becoming a Community of Practice. Therefore, the setting for the study was within the public spaces of this putative or emergent Community of Practice (CoP), in the form of TF meetings. Thus, the study was designed to answer research questions through observing meetings and by surveying and interviewing TF members. The following goals guided the respective parts of the study:

Through observation

- To describe how things were done by trainers in terms of the concept of practice and its objective regularities
- To explain why things happened as they did in terms of the TF being an activity system.

Through surveys

- To establish demographic details of trainers’ background, qualifications and workplace settings
- To discover their experiences/responsibilities related to training practice, course design, delivery and evaluation; and their definition of reactive and proactive training.

Through interviews
To find out how members made sense of it all depending on their epistemological frames of discourse or EFsD (saying-writing-doing-being-valuing-believing (Gee, op.cit.): how they ‘saw’ what went on at the TF.

Data was also gathered in the TF from participant feedback to particular TF meetings, and from artefacts produced from the Forum (published meeting reports).

Ultimately, the aim was to examine the constitution of training practice (in terms of its constituent complex activities) via examining artefacts, observing embodied practice, surveying and interviewing members of the community of trainers in order to analyse how agents are capable of transforming practice (collective activity) through mediated action. The study was correspondingly designed to analyse data gathered about what happened at the TF as an activity system, and to examine elements involved. Study design is described in subsequent sections.

5.1.1 Phases of Research
The research was designed and conducted as follows:-

Phase 1 Initial

- Informal observation (field notes; journal articles, adverts) to examine the structure of the community and its domain

Phase 2 Exploratory

- Formal observation (digital recordings)
- Questionnaire survey
- Informal discussions/conversations to determine “what goes on around here” in terms of practice, methodology and experience within the CoP

Phase 3 Confirmatory

To clarify how and why things happen the way they do in the CoP:-

- Formal observation (digital recordings)
• Informal discussions/conversations: in person and via e-mail

• Initial and follow-up interviews.

5.1.2 Setting and study population

The setting for the study was within the public spaces of an emergent Community of Practice (CoP): Training Forum (TF) meetings. Members of the TF formed the study population, some of whom participated/attended meetings on a regular, occasional or infrequent basis. The sample of interviewees was drawn from this population, estimated as totalling almost 120\textsuperscript{28}.

Members contributions within the TF were considered in terms of their observed participation status, categorised respectively as: core, active and peripheral, according to Wenger et al’s classification (2002:56). The intention was to select a cross-section of interviewees from: those questionnaire respondents who volunteered; and, from those members whose participation was defined as core, active or peripheral in order to:-

- Gain understanding of the experience of core, active or passive participation;
- Build biographies of TF members at different levels of participation; and
- Develop understanding of the learning experience – i.e. how and what do they learn from participating in the TF?

In effect, differentiating agents at different levels of community participation was intended to provide a comprehensive perspective and understanding of concepts, methods and experience of training as a practice within the community.

The categorisation of members of the community according to their participation status is described in the next section on Design Strategy.

5.1.3 Design strategy

If the TF is considered as an activity system: the community was formed by all who are Training Forum members, with individual trainers as subjects. The object of the activity was

\textsuperscript{28} Based on the number of TF members’ e-mailed in a call for suggestions for contributors to the September 2005 Forum.
the sharing of "best" practice and the discussion of topical training issues. The division of labour in relation to the achievement of the activity in this particular system was compartmentalised on the basis of members’ participation status as core, active or peripheral members of the CoP. That is, interviewees were selected to ensure the sample included those members observed at Forum meetings: listening, questioning, speaking, presenting, facilitating, or steering or organising meeting content. Hence, the design strategy subdivided members within the TF, according to their participation status (core, active and peripheral) as shown in the Table 5-1.

Initially, products of participation, such as discourse, TF discussion dialogue, or TF topic leaders’ comments were analysed as textual artefacts in light of the participation status of contributors (core, active, peripheral).

Further to subdividing members according to their participation status, the design strategy took account of different attendance patterns among members at each of these levels. That is, where possible, interviewees were subdivided according to their attendance record: regular, occasional and infrequent.

Regular attendees were those members who attended more than 8 out of 11 TF meetings (or almost two thirds) held since inauguration of the Community in 2004. Occasional attendees were those attending more than 6 but less than or equal to 8 meetings (i.e. more than half but less than two-thirds). Infrequent attendees were those attending less than 6 meetings (less than half).

The intention of these differentiation strategies was to determine how attendance patterns of members at different levels of participation affected the predominant EFD at the TF. For example, within the conceptual-analytical framework, language was a mediating artefact that revealed not only a contradiction within the CoP, but contrasting epistemological frames of discourse (between received or constructed knowers). Therefore, the idiom used in relation to
training practices generally or about evaluation specifically, from both stages of the study (i.e. theoretical analysis and empirical study) formed part of the analyses.

Finally, the public space in which observation took place was constituted by the individual sessions within meetings of the Forum. The private space in which observation also took place was constituted by meetings within the Steering Group.

5.1.3.1 Criteria for participation status categories

Steering group members were those observed to actively engage in the inception stages of organizing the Training Forum. Steering group members were also those subsequently engaged in driving the TF and its topic focus. This type of member formed the core category co-opting other TF members or non-members to present topics or to lead sessions or they volunteered themselves to do this.

Active members were those who attended TF meetings regularly, occasionally, or infrequently, asking questions and participating in Forum discussions, presenting or facilitating topic discussion. This group also included those who may have been involved in Steering Group (SG) activities at one time, but who at the time of their interviews had stepped down from this level of participation, consistent with the fluid and dynamic nature of participation (Wenger, 2002).

Peripheral members of the TF were those who seldom actively participated in discussions in this public space i.e. a peripheral member may not have asked questions, or only asked one question in the course of Forum attendance.

Although data was gathered from the same sources (the members) using different methods (observation, survey and interviews), it was intended that differentiating agents at different levels of community participation, would provide a comprehensive perspective and understanding of concepts, methods and experience of practice in the Trainers’ Forum.

External “guests” were not selected for interview, although their comments or artefacts were analysed as part of the discourse within the CoP and in terms of members’ reactions.
Where possible, on the basis of observation, questionnaire and informal/formal interview, members were further classified according to characteristics, identified within literature as affecting structuration of practice, or affecting levels of participation. For example, the *scale of operations* affects the control of material resources (people, things) and depends upon processes or structures being implemented to manage these resources (Nixon et al., 1997). Such processes might include the specification of a training process, as a separate function within clinical operations. Its implementation may also indicate the level of economic investment made by an organisation in terms of time and money spent on developing processes.

Alternatively, in smaller organisations, with a sole trainer, training process may be less defined or informal. Hence, at the level of the individual, a trainer’s knowledge and experience (concept of training and evaluation practice) may be shaped by their exposure (or lack thereof) to a formally specified system of training evaluation (methodology). In turn, their experience of the training process may depend on the scale of operations or the *type of practice setting* (CRO, pharma or ITP) determining specifications of the training process.

The possession of *qualifications* may be anticipated to signal individuals’ resources of basic discipline knowledge, and to signify their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991). The *type of practice setting* may then affect the epistemological expression and application of this discipline knowledge both within situated practice, and by extension through the embodiment of practice, within a CoP, depending on the influences from either an external ‘professional’ culture or an internal organisational culture (Alexander, op.cit.).

Therefore, by interviewing members selected according to their degree of participation in the TF as core, active or peripheral members and their frequency of attendance (regular, occasional or infrequent) these assumptions would be tested. Their workplace practice settings and whether they possess training qualifications would also be considered in the analysis in terms of their effect on participants’ EFD, knowledge and experience.
5.1.3.2 Interview Plan

Community members were approached, on an informal basis as part of the process of building biographies of TF members at different levels of participation over a period of time, and in order to develop understanding of how and what is learned from participating in the TF. The final numbers formally interviewed depended on the availability of community members matching each of the criteria shown in Table 5-1, and on reaching saturation point for theoretical sampling of data, gathered by different techniques, from a variety of sources.

The plan was to interview Forum members according to their employment profile, participation status and attendance record for meetings held from 2004 to 2008 (Table 5-2). After the first set of formal interviews, designed to establish members’ background, interviewees were then subdivided according to their emergent epistemological frame of discourse (EFD) revealed either during interview or from previous observation. That is, they were categorised, either as constructed or received knowers, into three groups as follows:

- Constructed or received knowers who were core members
- Constructed or received knowers who were active members, and, finally
- Constructed or received knowers who were peripheral members.

These two groups were then interviewed on one further occasion to establish their concept of practice and their perspectives on common and dominant interests in the TF.

5.2 Analyses Plan

The analysis plan is shown in Table 5-3 (Research analyses plan), at the end of this chapter. Each stage of analyses reflects the design of the study, in its three distinct research phases: initial, exploratory and confirmatory, as described in section 5.2.2.

The analytical strategy applied in the study is described fully in Chapter 3, section 3.3.
### Table 5-1: (Participation categories)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation status</th>
<th>Category of participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topic/session leaders who are Steering Group members</td>
<td>Core</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting organisers/leaders who are Steering Group members</td>
<td>Core</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioners who are Steering Group members</td>
<td>Core</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic/session leaders who are not Steering Group members</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular questioners who are not Steering Group members</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listeners and occasional questioners who are not Steering Group members</td>
<td>Peripheral</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 5-2: Interview Plan

**Contexts of participation (2004 -2008)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment Profile</th>
<th>CRO</th>
<th>PHARMA</th>
<th>ITP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attendance record</strong></td>
<td><strong>Participation status</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sub-totals</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Core</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Peripheral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular [Attended &gt;two-thirds of meetings]</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasional [Attended &gt;half of meetings]</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infrequent [Attended ≤ half of meetings]</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-total</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5-3: Research analyses plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research phase</th>
<th>Aim</th>
<th>Analytical framework</th>
<th>Form of CHAT analyses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Initial</td>
<td>Examine structure of the Community and its Domain</td>
<td>Community of Practice Community Domain</td>
<td>Phenomenological</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Exploratory</td>
<td>Determine “what goes on around here” by defining the ORoP</td>
<td>Objective Regularities of Practice (ORoP) Activity: Cognitive &amp; co-operative tasks; Internal Goods &amp; External Goods; Standards of Excellence</td>
<td>Theory-historical</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 3. Confirmatory| Clarify how & why things happen the way they do in the CoP           | Activity system Subject performing the activity: Trainers in a CoP Community shaping the activity through DoL & Rules Tools mediating the activity:  
  - Methodology - pedagogy (transmissive/deliberative)  
  - EFsD: being-valuing-believing regarding : Teaching & Learning approach (receiving-conveying knowledge/constructing knowledge)  
  - EFsD: saying-writing-doing regarding T & L methods (monologic/dialogic) Object of activity: (Concept & Experience of practice)  
    1. Sharing of best practice;  
    2. Discussing topical training issues;  
    3. Networking  
  Outcomes: Transformation/perpetuation of practice? | Object-historical Actual-empirical |