



The missing middle: communities of practice in a freelance labour market

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Irena Grugulis

Durham University, UK

Dimitrinka Stoyanova

University of St. Andrews, UK

Abstract

Learning at, and through, work is a key part of the skills literature. However, the idea and ideal of the 'community of practice' assumes that workplaces are coherent communities where the skilful are available for novices to consult and observe. This is not always the case. This research note, drawing on three months of detailed ethnographic research in a TV production company, explores the way communities of practice function in a labour market dominated by small firms and freelancers. It argues that the experienced workers who would normally be central to skills development are simply not available to consult or observe, since they are employed on freelance contracts. The novices' community is one with a 'missing middle'.

Keywords

communities of practice, creative industries, film and TV, learning, skills, SMEs

Introduction

Learning through socialization is an important part of the skills literature, from Lave and Wenger's (1991) 'communities of practice' to Crouch's (2005) community based skill formation. In these, novices learn through being part of a social group. They watch experts, assist with simple tasks (Wenger, 2005), listen to stories (Orr, 1996) and become full members as they gain expertise. In showing how people learn by watching, by doing and by joining groups this model provides a valuable insight into a particular means of learning. However, it has omissions. This article focuses on one such omission: the

Corresponding author:

Professor Irena Grugulis, Durham Business School, Durham University, Mill Hill Lane, Durham DH1 3LB.
Email: Irena.Grugulis@durham.ac.uk

assumption that workplaces are coherent communities, containers of competence (Wenger, 2000) where the skilful are available for novices to consult and observe.

Critical readings of the communities of practice literature have been curiously silent on this point. They have considered the structural issues raised by community size and boundaries, the existence and impact of trust and conflict and power relations which can affect the way groups function (see, for example Brown and Duguid, 2001; Handley et al., 2006; Roberts, 2006; Wenger, 2000). But the presence of competent and expert workers, the qualified masters of the craft, has simply been assumed.

Yet given the substantial and substantive changes to the labour market which have occurred since Lave and Wenger (1991) first wrote their account of Situated Learning, this is an unrealistic assumption. Traditional internal labour markets have declined, old hierarchies have been disordered and the new networked forms of organization have very different implications for skills (Cappelli, 2008; Grimshaw et al., 2005; Osterman, 1996). Outsourcing, 'at will' contracts and freelance work are much less effective at supporting communities of practice than stable work groups or vertically integrated bureaucracies.

In some sectors these changes mean that the conditions necessary for communities of practice to exist have disintegrated and participants rely on other (or no) models of skill formation, but this situation is not true of the creative industries. Here social networks buttress organizational structures (Blair, 2001; Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2009a) and industry professionals, trade bodies, firms and training colleges all expect extensive learning to occur at work. In UK TV production, the focus of our research, the problem was not that there were no communities of practice. For established professionals, employed on a freelance basis, communities existed, but these were transitory ones with little space for skills development (see Lindkvist, 2005 on the implications of temporary, project-based communities for learning). For novices, community membership, the legitimate peripheral participation which supports learning, was no longer a structural feature of the first few years of work. Labour market fragmentation meant that trainees, barred by UK tax laws from freelancing and generally employed in small independent production companies, had access only to incomplete communities of practice. They had contact with other novices and, occasionally, company owner-managers but enjoyed almost no direct connections with the experienced professionals who might be expected to be a key resource in social learning. This was, effectively, a community with a missing middle.

TV production has long been distinguished by learning through participation. Previously the UK labour market was characterized by job security, internal progression, a closed shop agreement with the union and high levels of workplace interdependency, so that learning through work was the principal mechanism for gaining skills (Bechky, 2006; Blair, 2001). After the Broadcasting Act of 1990 the industry fragmented (Dex et al., 2000; Saundry, 2001) and labour market structures changed dramatically. While the terrestrial broadcasters are still major employers the sector is now dominated by freelance workers and small independent companies (Skillset, 2007).

It is in this environment that the fieldwork was conducted. This research note is drawn from three months of participant observation, conducted between 2005 and 2006 as part of a wider study, in a small, regional independent production company (here anonymized as 'ColourTV'). The full-time researcher was given a key to the office, a desk, an email

account and allowed full access to production activities. Her role was that of observer rather than participant, though she occasionally acted as a junior researcher, helped out with office tasks, operated the sound 'boom' on a couple of shoots and sat in on the editing process. The numbers employed varied, often quite dramatically, but during the fieldwork there were eight members of staff, six of whom were novices, employed, in the words of Andrew, one of the company directors, because 'they tend to be the assistants and they are learning and they are watching'.

In practice, however, such watching and learning was limited. Novices had little contact with, and few opportunities to watch, the established professionals. Indeed, the extent to which they and the novices were part of the same 'community' is questionable. Novices did the routine work for many productions, but they were based in the company's office while freelancers were on location. This geographical separation, coupled with the short-term nature of contracts (freelancers could be hired for as little as half a day) meant that there was no continuity of relationships, so assistance was no guarantee of either social links or legitimate peripheral participation. Novices were effectively reliant on each other's advice to solve problems.

There was little sense of cumulative, sequential development and few opportunities to build relationships with established and experienced workers. Some novices were able to progress (by moving to freelance contracts), and most learned some skills but they were also frustrated at the disjuncture between the work they were expected to do and the work they wanted to do. 'Stretchwork' (O'Mahony and Bechky, 2006), which extended skills by combining tasks workers could do with those that challenged them, and which could effectively bridge the gap between different roles, was notably absent.

Novices at work

Communities of practice are both a forum for developing technical skills and a social network through which those skills can be exercised and policed. These two processes are very much interdependent, as the correlation of membership and expertise signals. Here, while each is dealt with separately, it is important to emphasize the links between the two.

Gaining technical skills

All six novices at ColourTV were graduates (three had qualified in media studies, one in the visual arts, one in performing arts and media studies and one in English literature from Cambridge) and all had initially arrived on unpaid short-term work placements or work experience secondments in order to learn about television production. They were employed on permanent contracts, although only one had actually been given a written contract, and while wages were not high, all were paid (in contrast to practice elsewhere, see Holgate and McKay, 2007). Most of the tensions arose because of the mismatch between the mundane administrative tasks they were assigned and the developmental jobs ('stretchwork') that would facilitate careers in the industry. Productions had to be organized, permissions gained for material used and equipment sorted out.

Because they had done a lot of production and they had all – all the producers were freelance and they have left all the paperwork to do. Like, you need to go through the programme and find out what archive is in there, what music is being used and it should all have been cleared beforehand but it really hadn't been. I think they had an intense period where they had got all this work in, but the thing with producers is they want to get out when they have finished... So there was all this work to do and not much – you know, and not many people wanting to do it because it is not something that people really enjoy doing.

(Britney, production assistant, with company 16 months)

The division of work was gendered. William, the only male trainee, was assigned to the editing suite while the five women were allocated secretarial, administrative and accounting duties. Officially Brianna was in charge of accounts, Brigit was Andrew's PA and Britney was Nathan's PA. All six had joined in the hope of breaking into the creative side: researching, filming, directing and editing. Production management and administration were of interest only to the extent that they could lead to one of these, more coveted, roles. As Britney said, 'I want to work on programmes, I don't want to be the person who has to clear up other people's mistakes.' Most of the novices were anxious to offload as many of the mundane tasks as possible and occasionally students and hopefuls on unpaid placement proved a source of willing labour. One, attending in the hope of working on news programmes, ended up collecting post from the post-office as well as doing routine administration for both Victoria and Mary, who vied with each other for the privilege of allocating work.

Some of the more developmental tasks were pseudo-projects rather than participation in real work, and acted as sops to the novices' pressure for skill-building. Victoria and Brianna worked on 'bids' to commissioning editors in the hope that a bright idea might excite further interest, Victoria independently while Brianna supported Andrew. These were always done collaboratively with a known 'name', although the bids were mostly written by the junior researchers. Both were enthused by this and the only group meeting during this fieldwork was convened by Victoria to brainstorm possible topics for bids with Brigit, Mary, Chris (a senior staff member) and Jessica (a freelance researcher). She supplied cake and grapes and all enthusiastically proffered ideas. Such bids were not only more interesting than the office administration, they also offered novices hope since a successful bidder would be asked to work on the project, but these speculative attempts were very unlikely to succeed. They were a common task for production companies to assign to novices or students on work placements since (like entering the lottery) they might work and they cost little to produce. However, most commissions are relationship based, since editors need to be sure that the firm putting forward a suggestion will have the resources, talent and prudence to produce a decent project within budget and on time. Many are effectively 'closed calls' as people in the loop get to know what particular editors are looking for. Moreover novices, who by definition have not worked on many, if any, commissions, are least able to put together a convincing bid.

Doing the paperwork for projects where they did not get to observe production was a fairly tenuous way of developing technical skills. Far better, in this respect at least, were the activities initiated and carried through by the novices themselves. If company equipment was not needed staff were welcome to borrow it in order to work on their own projects and both William and Brigit took advantage of this: William to film corporate

videos, commissions ColourTV was aware of but which he worked on in his own time and Brigit to develop sample film of a documentary about refugees. People on placements also spent their time engaged with their own projects, but these tended to be ideas they brought with them, and were separate to the main work of ColourTV. This industry attracts hobbyists and it is relatively common to find professionals working for free or spending their free time on un-commissioned work. ColourTV was supportive and provided equipment.

Despite the routine nature of the tasks most of the novices were assigned, work was justified in terms of what it might lead to, rather than what it actually involved.

Andrew wants me to get more involved in that [the creative side] so I think once I have to do less of these chores I think you know I will have more time to... I mean in our last review he said to me you know oh, I think you are the best PA I have ever had in my whole 27 years or whatever it is. And he is like well you know, I want to start you know putting your money up and for you to take on more responsibilities and you know. So get more involved in things.

(Brigit, Andrew's PA, with company 15 months)

Brigit was not alone in taking this view. The progression from observation to assistance to expertise is a key component of communities of practice as well as the norm in the industry. Both of ColourTV's directors referred regularly to ex-employees who had gone on to higher things. According to Andrew, the founding director:

I mean, one of the best cameramen and editors up here at the moment in the area of [names county] started with us as a tea boy with no formal education... I don't know how many people have come through ColourTV – a lot of people in the BBC, ITV, independents, some independents.... A woman that Nathan met in a bar, who spoke Spanish serving behind the bar, is now one of this region's, you know, sort of good directors.

One director even suggested that placements were so valuable the government should pay the firm £10,000 a year per trainee. It was true that novices' jobs could provide a route into other (more desirable) work. One ex-employee, Mary, had been Andrew's PA and, when the company were short of staff, had started working as a researcher on a music documentary.

Unfortunately, when I was working as Andrew's PA there weren't any productions on – it was a very quiet time for ColourTV and they had a very inexperienced development team working. So it was quite a frustrating time I think for everyone and so most of my job unfortunately was typing.... they didn't want me to leave because I think that that is what they thought I would do if I just continued doing Andrew's typing.... It was kind of like, well, you were here first, you can go and then we will move Brigit up into that position and then Brigit will eventually get to work on production.... Andrew doesn't tend to have a PA for longer than a year.

(Mary, researcher and ex-employee, with company 18 months)

When the series was re-commissioned the budget was cut dramatically (from £45,000 to £30,000 an episode). The actual work involved was straightforward (assembling archive clips and interviews, Robert, one of the freelance directors commented, 'I could direct that on my mobile') so the company directors re-hired Mary as an associate producer to

take advantage of both her experience of the first series and the fact that she cost significantly less than a fully qualified freelancer. One year later, when they had finished filming, Mary had worked a series of 12 one-hour documentaries with two credits as full producer.

But this move from secretary to researcher seemed to be the exception rather than the rule and Robert questioned whether the novices' administrative experience within ColourTV would help them get work in production. The junior staff on every other project were bought in as freelancers, a source of much consternation among the novices. After various developmental conversations with Andrew, Brigit was disturbed to take a call from an external applicant about an advertisement in the trade paper for work she had hoped to move on to, while Victoria, who applied for the post directly, was turned down ('not enough experience').

Joining the group

The fact that the novices spent most of their time on routine tasks was a source of tremendous frustration to them but does not necessarily raise problems with the operation of a community of practice. Mundane tasks are, after all, an integral part of peripheral participation and the means by which novices legitimate their membership of the group. More damaging was the fact that here, novices were separated from experts. Although many skilled freelancers were hired for the various commissions ColourTV won, the office staff met few of them (during the fieldwork only two freelance directors, one editor and one researcher ever went in to the office) and there were no opportunities for intensive interaction. The camera, sound and lighting people worked on set rather than in the office and, while Britney was sent on a developmental trip to the US both to collect tapes and to get an opportunity to see the team filming this was the only instance of a novice on set during the fieldwork, and even watching freelancers work in the office seemed to be discouraged. Peter, a freelance editor, did work on a science documentary in ColourTV's editing suite, giving William the chance to watch him at work but only Brigit was invited to join the directors and the two freelancers to watch preliminary 'rushes' and chat to the editor. It seemed that learning by socializing was the exception, rather than the rule.

[Freelance director project 1] and [freelance director project 2] are almost not communicating with anyone else in the office. The... ColourTV staff have their researches and everyone is feeding them with information. But the freelancers work somehow quite separately.

(Fieldwork notes)

Robert, one of the freelance directors, did make a point of introducing himself to every new face and having a brief chat but, in general, for everything from detailed discussions about work to greetings at the start and end of each working day there was a division between the freelance staff and the novices employed in the office. Deprived of ready access to skilled professionals and reluctant to approach the over-worked company directors most of the time the novices helped one another, from Victoria convening a meeting about her bid, to 'mentoring' students on placement, to Britney and Mary

working together on the music documentary. But there was a limit to the amount of expertise such interaction could provide.

Well, Nathan didn't teach me – he didn't teach me... because Nathan is really busy because he is general manager and production manager. It was really like, the blind leading the – you know, sort of but I think I have learned better because I have taught myself kind of... But then it was awful training Mary because Mary has no experience. It was awful... there was a point where I was like near breaking point, really. I was really frustrated because the whole thing about pay started to come into play.... [because] while Mary was Andrew's PA she was on a better rate than me anyway, but then she came on board this production and she was on a better rate than me but I was telling her what to do. You know, not telling her what to do, I was teaching her.

(Britney, production assistant, with company 16 months)

There is a new young man on a work placement in the office... Brigit was apparently 'appointed' to help him: but she just chatted to him a few times. He does not seem to have a real mentor.

(Fieldwork notes)

Novices were employed by ColourTV to provide general assistance for all productions and attend to the corporate administration. Their responsibilities, reporting lines and location insulated them from the freelancers. Here, while the task of production was shared, the community was split.

Discussion and conclusions

In many respects, skills development in ColourTV still resembled that in Lave and Wenger's communities of practice: novices were assigned to routine and administrative tasks, hoping to progress from these to key roles in programme production. This was also the accepted route for progression in the industry. Start on low-level support jobs, learn about the way projects run, work hard, express enthusiasm, get to know people and then move up the ladder. However, in reality, there was a significant gulf between the traditional sectoral communities and current practice. While legitimate peripheral participation involves mundane tasks these are undertaken for, and in full view of, the full members of the craft.

Lave and Wenger (1991) made it clear that knowledge was decentred, that apprentices often learned from their peers and that craft skills were often passed on through a form of benign neglect but they also stressed the relationship which built up between novices and qualified craft workers, fostered by the assistance the novices offered and the transparency of practice in the expert group. Put simply, in each of the very diverse communities studied, novices regularly and repeatedly watched full members of the group at work and listened to them speak of practice. When this did not happen, it caused problems. So, the apprentice meat-cutters who were unable to observe qualified meat cutters cutting and sawing meat failed to either learn what was required or establish social links with those who were skilled in the craft (1991: 76–9).

Here that separation occurs through labour market structure rather than workplace design. As a result the mundane tasks allocated to novices are only mundane tasks, leading neither to technical competence nor to group membership. This is not to argue that making headway was impossible. It was not, as Mary's experience demonstrates.

Novices' lack of contact with freelancers, however, broke the link between routine work and participation.

This work also reveals a theoretical lacuna in the existing literature on communities of practice: the expertise possessed by group members. Since the social group and technical skills are so interwoven it is surprising that so little attention has been paid to group expertise, as opposed to group structures. Particularly since, as both this research note and Lave and Wenger's original account make clear, without ready access to visible, transparent expertise novices struggled to learn, or even to know what they needed to learn. The restructuring of UK TV production has split experts from novices without removing the need for communities of practice. Fragmenting and restructured labour markets are not limited to the creative industries and, as Smith and McKinlay (2009) observe, this sector often has valuable lessons for elsewhere. It cannot be assumed, in the absence of institutional support, that communities of practice will provide a flexible and enduring mechanism for developing skills and attention does need to be focused on both the membership of communities and the transparency of practice.

This research has practical implications for the UK TV industry. Skills development in TV production, together with many of the other creative industries, involves two discrete but interwoven elements: gaining technical skills and joining a social (work) group. Traditionally these have been concurrent, undertaken in and through a community of practice. Novices, initially baffled by frenzied bursts of activity, start to make sense not only of what their own job requires, but how it fits in to the activity of the production as a whole.

These communities have been affected by the fracturing of the labour market. Established professionals still make extensive use of their social networks for a variety of purposes (Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2009a, 2009b), though their temporary projects are less effective for building skills (Lindkvist, 2005). As observed here, the split between freelancers and small independent companies means that the communities novices have access to are incomplete.

Many of the large companies still support traineeships, but workers trained in this way account for an increasingly declining proportion of the labour market while independent projects have smaller teams and shorter shoots. Technological developments and budget pressures have combined to limit the number of assistants hired, while most freelancers will be employed only for that part of the production where their expertise is required. There are ways of coping with such fragmented labour markets. Bernhardt and Bailey (1998), in an attempt to deal with the implications of similar fractures in the US, suggest a more extensive use of intermediary institutions with craft unions or employer owned firms providing skills development, security and health insurance not offered by the wider labour market. Theirs is a valuable suggestion, but for it to be realized in the UK key participants need to acknowledge the failure of the existing arrangements.

So far this has not happened. Indeed, most of the existing arrangements rely specifically on functional communities of practice. The technical aspects of the training, for example, could be devolved to colleges, effectively moving it 'downstream'. Some new courses have been set up, principally by the regional screen agencies and the trade unions. They do cover practical and project based work but most seek to enhance their students' skills by sending them on placements. Not only are such short placements a

poor substitute for continual learning at and through work but, given the problems with incomplete communities of practice, it is unlikely that they will function effectively. With this in mind, it is not clear how the industry's current cohort of novices will ever acquire the skills taken for granted by previous generations of workers.

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Irena Grugulis is a Professor at Durham University Business School, AIM/ESRC Services Fellow and an associate fellow of SKOPE. Her research focuses on all areas of skill: recent projects have covered the retail sector as well as work in film and TV and she is currently conducting an ethnography of work in computer games. Her work has been funded by the ESRC, EPSRC and EU. Recent articles include 'Skill and performance' with Dimitrinka Stoyanova in the *British Journal of Industrial Relations*. Books include *Customer Service* with Andrew Sturdy and Hugh Willmott; *The Skills that Matter* with Chris Warhurst and Ewart Keep and *Skills, Training and Human Resource Development*, all published by Palgrave.

Dimitrinka Stoyanova is a Lecturer in Management at St Andrews School of Management. Her research engages with freelance work and the creative industries. Themes within it are learning and skills development, freelance careers, the experience of employment, networks of small independent production companies and social capital. It focuses on the ways in which the changing institutional environment interacts with the established norms and practices of the professional communities and the implications this has for individuals, organizations and policymakers. Previously she has held positions at Bradford University School of Management and a small international consultancy.

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