

Placements as Communities of Practice (CoP): Insights from a student and a lecturer's exploration of CoP in a placement module in higher education

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Abstract

Placements are becoming an integral part of undergraduates' experiences of higher education. They are offered in various subject areas, including education, and can be taken by students as different types of work-based experiences, such as placements. The literature supports this focus on placement experiences through the publication of long lists of benefits for students, universities and employers. However, there is also evidence of limitations in placement experiences that hinder this generalised view of placements as beneficial. Therefore, this article offers a reflective account by a lecturer and a student of their experience of using the framework of Communities of Practice (CoP) and socio-cultural concepts in a placement module in higher education. Through this reflective account, the article argues that CoP, as a framework for social learning rooted in participation, can support students to engage with the setting, people and knowledge in the placement when integrated into a module. The article also suggests the need to consider additional features of the placement experience, such as structure and pedagogical approaches, thus offering valuable insights to other placement modules in the UK and beyond.

Introduction

Placements are becoming an integral part of undergraduates' experiences and the transition into work. A recent research project by the Sutton Group found that 46% of young graduates under 24 included in their 2,614 sample had completed a placement while in higher education or straight after completing the degree (Cullinane and Montacute, 2018). The research further highlighted that graduate placements are on the rise, and students often have more than one placement or workplace experience before entering the work world (Cullinane and Montacute, 2018).

This increase in the uptake of work experiences in higher education, suggested in the Sutton Report, seems to be driven by the popularity of placements as a strategy to develop work-related competencies for students, academics and

employers (Pereira et al., 2020). Consequently, there is a strong foundation of emergent research into placements in areas where they are well established, such as with trainee teachers. However, that is not always the case with other less vocational courses, even within education-related degrees (Holman and Richardson, 2021).

Indeed, emergent research into placements has undoubtedly contributed to the popularity of placements through the ongoing publication of long lists of benefits of work-related experiences. The benefits listed in the literature range from the development of transferable skills (Jackson, 2016) to the improvement of academic results (Kettis et al., 2013) or even the worthwhile opportunity to explore career choices (Mello et al., 2021). Often, the benefits of work experience are tied to notions of employability. For example, a recent literature review on employability and placements in higher education listed benefits to students, institutions and employers (Atfield et al., 2021).

At an institutional level, universities in the UK are also increasingly being ranked based on the employability of their graduates, measured through national exercises such as the Graduate Outcomes Survey (Mello and Wattret, 2021). The implication here is that universities have a clear and growing incentive to consider and be concerned about the success of their students well beyond graduation. This becomes even more relevant to higher education institutions when such results have the potential to influence recruitment (Pereira et al., 2020), meaning that several contextual factors contribute to an interest in the value of placements and other types of work experience in higher education.

It is not surprising, then, that currently, in the UK, work-related experiences are offered in a variety of subject areas, including education, nursing, criminology, and business, and can be taken by students as short-term placements, sandwich placements, work-based projects (Atfield et al., 2021), among other emerging trends aiming to connect universities to the workplace. Of relevance at this point is the clarification that the definition of and separation between these types of work-based learning experiences is difficult because employers and universities often use different concepts interchangeably (Atfield et al., 2021; Cullinane and Montacute, 2018). These work-based experiences also vary in structure (e.g., duration, intensity, support) and purpose (Cullinane and Montacute, 2018), which can potentially muddle the widespread assumption of the benefits of placements. Indeed, literature has also highlighted potential limitations in placement experiences, such as the lack of opportunity to integrate theory into practice (Blackwell et al., 2001), challenges in returning to university after a placement, or even placement experiences that are not completed because the host no longer can support the students (Atfield et al., 2021).

For clarity, in the context of this article, placements are defined as:

“work within a business or organisation which is primarily intended to provide experience, skills and/or contacts that will help the worker (or student in this case) obtain employment or other work opportunities in the future”. (Stewart et al., 2023, p. 3)

This choice of definition relates to its broad explanation of placements as work experience towards improving employment opportunities. Going further still, in this article, we conceptualise placements as opportunities for learning, development and becoming, which aligns with our sociocultural approach to the exploration of placements. In addition, the placement experiences explored in the article can also be characterised as short-placements and practice placements (Atfield et al., 2021). These characteristics are related to the context of the research project that was developed within the scope of an optional module in the second year of a BA in Education Studies at a UK university.

Finally, it is important to take a critical stance on the literature and raise questions about what are “good” and “valuable” work-based experiences for students. Especially since there is some evidence of students taking individualised approaches to placements (e.g., reinforcing student identities instead of engaging in the exploration of professional identity) that do not reflect typical benefits (Oliveira, 2023) and of negative experiences when placements do not offer adequate opportunities to integrate theory into practice (Blackwell et al., 2001) or limit students to repetitive tasks (Mensah et al., 2021).

Consequently, the article explores the experiences of a lecturer and a student who reflect on teaching and learning the framework of Communities of Practice (CoP) in a placement module. The main claim presented here is that CoP as a framework for participation (Wenger, 2009; Wenger et al., 2002), when integrated into a placement module with scaffolded reflection, can support students to engage with the placement experience in a manner that is more useful for the student. We argue that in this context CoP can support students’ engagement with the setting, the people and the practices of the workplace by encouraging a gradual, yet increasing interaction and learning that is grounded in students’ agency.

Communities of Practice: a participatory theory of learning

The theory of CoP was developed by Lave and Wenger (1991), who defined it as a group of people who share similar concerns, problems or interests and, therefore, meet and interact regularly to develop their expertise. This theory was developed in professional, apprentice-related settings and, in that way, offers a participatory theory of learning, sustained by the regular interaction of its members. It is through this interaction and eventually by being formally recognised as a member of the group that an individual becomes part of a CoP (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 5).

However, members are not expected to work together every day. Instead, they should meet for valuable interactions. These can include reflecting on their aspirations through a similar social lens (Wenger, 2009), producing a repertoire of communal resources, or solving real-time challenges related to their practice (Johnston, 2016; Haijan, 2019). Indeed, it is clear from this introduction that interaction and intentional engagement are the essence of this framework.

Regarding its structure, a CoP can be characterised by three features: the 'domain' of knowledge, the 'community of people' that form the CoP, and their 'shared practice' (Wenger et al., 2002). The domain is the subject explored in the CoP and includes element of implicit and explicit knowledge. These are types of knowledge that are transmitted within the CoP, either more formally through codified language, organised and written specifically for a newcomer (explicit), or more informally through, for example, observations (implicit) (Eraut, 2007). When newcomers enter a new CoP, they need access to both types of knowledge to learn the language, the tools and the processes used by more experienced members and, in the process of learning them, gain membership to the CoP. In other words, newcomers interact with other members to gain the knowledge that will allow them to develop appropriate practices in that context.

There are benefits to being part of a CoP that relate to learning in workplaces and placements. For example, CoP explain how individuals can improve their experience of working within a particular professional environment. The theory explains this happens through increased contribution, 'meaningful participation' and collaboration with expert colleagues (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 16). To achieve 'full participation' (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 229), newcomers go through a process of legitimate peripheral participation where they direct themselves through the setting gradually, but with agency (Oliveira, 2017). This movement starts from the peripheries and occurs between the newcomer and the more experienced members of the CoP through activities that include but are not exclusive to asking questions, listening and observing, learning from mistakes, or receiving feedback (Eraut, 2007). What is clear here is that although the more experienced members of the CoP may be fundamental in allowing access, newcomers require a level of pro-activity and confidence to initiate and make the most of the opportunities provided.

The research project

Context and Design

This reflective article explores the use of CoP as a framework to interpret and support the transition of Education Studies students into a short work placement. It is set within a research project focusing on an optional second-year module of the BA Education Studies, at a post-92 UK university, where students had to complete 35 hours in an educational work-placement of their choice.

The placement module took place in the Spring term of the 2021/22 academic year and included seven workshops with a duration of two hours each, plus 35 hours of placement experience. The placement's hours took place alongside the workshops to allow for reciprocity in discussing theories and experiences and encourage student engagement with the placement and the module. The workshops explored topics such as employability and skills, transfer of learning, and communities of practice. To complete the module, students had to fulfil the 35 hours in the placement and submit a 2500-word reflective report, where they reflected on their placement experiences using the theories and concepts

explored in the workshops. Indeed, previous research has highlighted the need to scaffold students' ability to reflect on placement experiences (Mello & Wattret, 2021) and the importance of assessing these reflections to improve the success of the placement (Atfield et al., 2021). Therefore, the module included ample opportunities for reflection via different activities developed in the workshops, which could be included in the final reflective report.

The research project aimed to investigate not only the students' experiences of their transition to a work placement but also the module itself as a mediator of those transitions. More specifically, the focus was on investigating to what extent the placement module's activities and theories supported or constrained students' transitions between university and the workplace. This dual aim of the project meant that both reflection on practice (reflecting on what happened during practice) and reflection for action (reflecting to improve practice) (Ghaye, 2011) were always present and equally relevant for the students and the lecturer/researcher.

In terms of research design, the reflection presented here is part of an instrumental case study (Stake, 2013) with a convenience, purposive sample that provided access to rich information (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018) and insight into students' transitions between university and work, during their short placements. The choice of a case study design was influenced by the possibility of developing a multi-perspective approach that would allow for an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of students' experiences (Lucas et al., 2018). Indeed, the design was informed by previous studies that highlighted that:

“as an account of practice, explained analytically, case study is a valuable methodology for the research of educational practice, particularly given the scope for the representation of complex practice with multiple and bundled trajectories”. (Miles, 2015, p. 316)

These multiple trajectories in this study were the different students taking a placement in a different educational setting and coming together every two weeks to discuss their experiences through the same analytical lenses.

Sample

The participants were students attending an optional, second-year placement module in the BA Education Studies at a post-92 University in the UK during the academic year of 2021/22.

When the module started, 51 students (about half of the full cohort) enrolled in the module, and 36 (71%) agreed to participate in the study. Of these, 32 were female students (89%) and four were male (11%). The 36 participants were in various placement settings, from schools to charities, engaging in a range of formal and informal educational practices. Most students (17) had a placement in a primary school.

Data collection and analysis

The data collected for the study included elements that were part of the placement module, such as individual and group activities completed in the workshops (e.g., a list of expected benefits of the placement, a drawing of transfer of learning, a mind map of the different ways students were learning from others in the placement); independent work completed in between workshop sessions (e.g., a placement log of hours worked and tasks completed, written tasks on the key topics of the workshop); and a final piece of work submitted after the module (the module's assignment). The project's data set also included semi-structured interviews with seven students. These took place a couple of weeks after the module was completed, lasted around thirty minutes each and were done over MS Teams for students' convenience.

Regarding data analysis, the interview data was fully transcribed, coded and analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis followed the recursive process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022) that included a constant movement between the different phases assisted by ongoing reflection on the process and the results of data analysis.

Finally, the thematic analysis was combined with a systematic visual-textual approach to ensure that the different data modes were equally considered and valued (Brown & Collins, 2021). This meant that textual and visual data were coded and organised thematically to interpret and present students' experiences of the placement and the module.

In the context of this article, the dataset will be secondary as the focus will be on Daya and Oliveira's experiences as a student and lecturer in the module. More specifically, the emphasis is on a reflective element within the project (Daya's reflection on his experiences as a student on the module) and alongside the project (Oliveira's reflection on her experiences of setting up and delivering the module). For this reason, the findings presented may refer to the broader data set of the project when relevant but will mainly explore the individual reflections of the authors. These reflections were conceptualised here as:

“skilled practice that uses experience, knowledge and enquiry processes to increase our capability to intervene, interpret, and act positively on successes, problems, issues and significant questions”. (Ghaye, 2011, p. 20)

Ethical considerations and positionality

The project was designed and developed following the ethical considerations proposed by BERA (2018) for educational research and approved by DMU's ethics' committee. The ethical considerations included informed consent, anonymity, the right to withdraw and data protection processes, which were presented to potential participants via a participant information sheet. All participants signed a consent form allowing the researcher access to the materials they produced in the module, and for seven participants, this also included access to the interview data.

Following Head's (2020) notion of an ethic of care for educational research, issues of power imbalance associated with conducting research with the lecturer's students were considered. For example, the project was designed so that additional data collection (i.e., the interviews) only took place after the module was completed and assignments submitted and marked. The aim here was to eliminate as much as possible the pressure that students might feel to take part in the study and the suggestion that it could impact their assessment. The remaining data (activities and assessments) were part of the module, meaning that all students completed them in the same way, whether they were a participant or not. This meant the project was as unobtrusive as possible to the module's students (Head, 2020).

Finally, Head (2020) suggests that power differentials in research can be mitigated through elements of co-production, and although there were no elements of co-production in the design of the study, this reflective article is a collaboration between the lecturer and student, both researchers in this instance, developing together an understanding of the value of CoP for interpreting placement experiences within higher education.

Findings: Placement as Communities of Practice

A Student's Perspective

This section will review my lived experience and perspectives as a placement student at a local-authority maintained primary school in Leicester. More specifically, here I will reflect on my experiences with the support of Lave and Wenger's (1991) CoP framework.

The school where I completed my work placement is situated in a culturally diverse area of the city and aims to establish a memorable and positive learning experience whilst maintaining a safe and accepting environment to reflect not only the school's community but also the broad and balanced curriculum that they deliver. Alongside the core objective of enabling pupils to attain their maximum potential, the school aspires to develop pupils' ability to question, think rationally, and work independently. The placement setting lent the possibility to explore the various disciplines that typify an Education Studies degree, as it involved working with learners in an educational academic setting. In this instance, it involved me working with a year four mixed-ability class.

My role in the placement was similar to that of a teaching assistant. It involved the preparation of learning materials, working with small groups of pupils to support individual and collaborative learning, as well as adhering to the expectations, policies and working practices of the school. These tasks required me to develop good working relationships and communicate effectively with pupils and practitioners to create the best possible learning environment within the classroom. As outlined in the previous sections, the placement aligned itself with the fundamental tenets of both the CoP and socio-cultural theory frameworks

as I met and interacted with colleagues every week to develop my subject knowledge, deepen my professional expertise, and improve my understanding and skill set through the acquisition of a common body of knowledge (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger et al., 2002). Indeed, being aware of the framework for CoP as I entered the placement encouraged me to be proactive in my engagement with colleagues and students in the setting. I then consolidated this learning through personal reflection on my professional identity and through the module's workshops. The running of the workshops alongside the placement was vital for me to develop my reflections. Without this, the quality of reflection and criticality would undoubtedly have been worse.

In the workshops, I learned that one of the three defining characteristics of a CoP is the access to explicit and implicit information, which make up the community's 'domain of knowledge' (Wenger et al., 2002). As I reflected on my experience, I noted that I was given a selection of handbooks, codes of conduct and school policies before starting my placement. All of these were designed and organised to share important information with newcomers like myself and establish a shared knowledge base with other adults around the school. It was evident how this was standard practice – all newcomers had easy access to this information, and it was useful information to have. For example, I was provided with information on fire exits and instructions in the event of a child requiring first aid. This proved to be useful when a pupil in the class cut themselves. It was because I had received the relevant information in the form of written 'explicit' instructions (Eraut, 2007) that I was able to send the student to the appropriate location where a first aider was on duty, despite me being a newcomer and not having experienced that situation before. Equally, at the start of the placement, I was given copies of safeguarding, equality and behaviour policies and was introduced by my mentor to classroom models and reflection processes such as the 'I, We and You' model that was used to guide the teacher and pupils during self and teacher assessment. These examples of explicit knowledge were not only easy to access due to their availability, but they were also specifically communicated to me during the initial stages of my placement, to encourage me to use them appropriately whilst on the school premises (Eraut, 2007).

On the other hand, 'implicit information' is formed when meanings are attached to objects, events or phenomena and are only accessible through ongoing observation and participation in the CoP's social activities (Wenger, 2009). As the placement progressed, I familiarised myself with the class routines and the structure of a typical Friday - which differed completely from the generic schedule that was provided to me in the school's handbook. This is an example of knowledge which can be categorised as 'implicit', as it was only through working and interacting in the class that I was able to adopt a routine that was preferred by my mentor and familiar to the pupils (Eraut, 2007; Lave & Wenger, 2002). Here, and supported by the CoP's framework, I understood the importance of actively engaging with the placement to promote my learning. Other examples of implicit knowledge that I gained in the placement included knowing how pupils addressed each other during registers, or how to get the children's attention by clapping my hands or vocalising phrases such as 'hands on top, everybody stop'.

These were practices that I had to physically witness before understanding the true meaning behind them and the reasons for why they were in place. This knowledge was not written down or directly communicated to me, and I had to learn it by attending my placement week after week and observing what was happening and how (Eraut, 2007). It is imperative to note that although the acquisition of knowledge did not prove to be a significant challenge, it was heavily reliant on my active engagement, as well as support and guidance from my mentor, who gradually and over time provided me with opportunities to understand, and then implement this knowledge in real-time. Ultimately, it was in these social interactions, which Eraut (2007) argues are the epistemological foundation of the CoP framework, that I developed a sense of belonging, as well as the confidence to use both sets of knowledge to actively mirror my mentors' practice while developing my own.

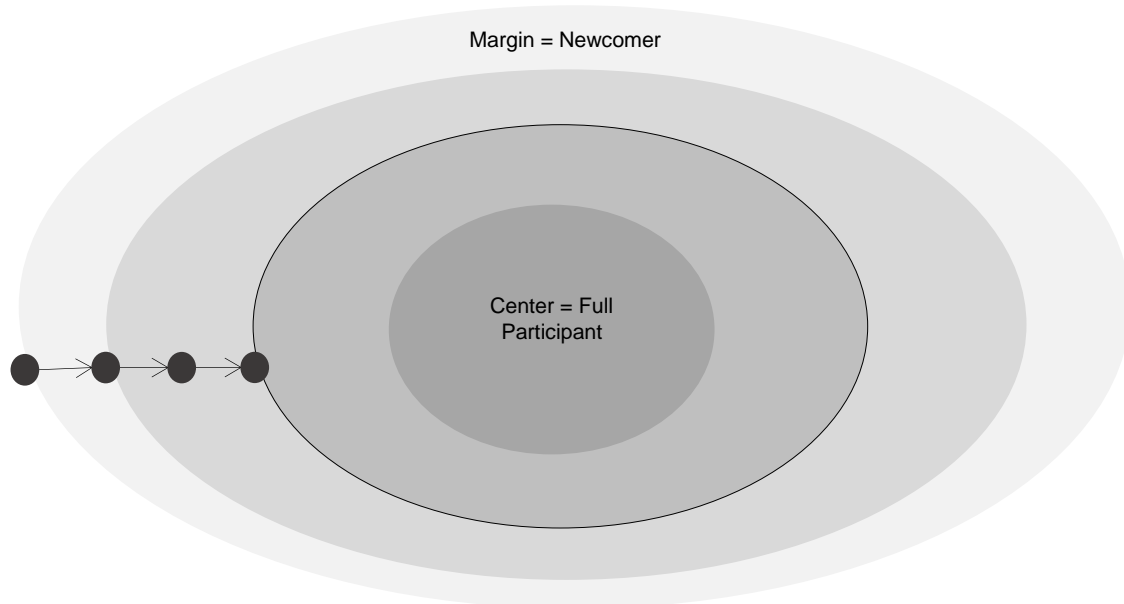
Looking back at my experience, I recognise that I required considerable support at the start of my placement and lacked the confidence to work with children. After all, this was my first experience volunteering in an educational setting. However, as the weeks progressed, I overcame initial challenges through my active engagement in the setting, including asking questions and working closely with staff members. This is echoed by Eraut (2007), who highlights the importance of newcomers 'proactively' asking questions to obtain information in learning contexts. My progress was also mainly facilitated by the classroom teacher, who acted as a 'relevant other', which is a person in the CoP who takes on the role of a mentor by engaging in informal conversations, providing constructive criticism and establishing an environment where I felt a sense of belonging and inclusivity (Oliveira, 2017).

Towards the end of my placement, I started to take on a more active role in conducting spelling tests, being responsible for lower-ability groups and delivering interventions in the form of a micro-teach in preparation for the national testing for the phase. I also identified strengths, weaknesses and the differing capabilities of each pupil. With time, I was allocated more complex tasks, and with the trust and confidence of staff members who believed that I was capable of carrying out responsibilities to the level expected in the school, I could deliver and lead a small group session. This ended up becoming my 'best moment' in the placement. It was a true reflection of my transition from starting the placement, experiencing challenges and obstacles, to ending the placement with the confidence to lead a session. Still, even after completing my 35 hours in the placement, I never felt like an expert or a full participant (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

My trajectory in the placement is reflected in Figure 1, which is an exercise I completed in one of the workshops I had to attend at university during the placement. It illustrates my movement in the placement from the beginning until the end, and it shows how I felt that I was gradually moving towards the centre of the CoP but never quite getting there. My "onion"ⁱ diagram shows how I progressively felt more confident and received more responsibilities. However, it also shows how I felt that to be a full participant, I would need to have a

professional role in the school, which was beyond the scope and benefits of my placement experience.

Figure 1- Daya's Placement Trajectory



<p>Week 1: on starting the placement I wasn't aware of any of its members. Activities and my role was limited to that of a placement student.</p>	<p>Week 5: I am more aware of the people and the activities that take place. I have been given more responsibilities and can attach more meaning to daily activities.</p>	<p>Towards the end: I feel a little closer to becoming a full participant as I have extended my role to become a school volunteer and now independently work on jobs assigned to me. However, I am not a full-member.</p>	<p>Future: I will never become a full-member until I have a full professional role within that setting.</p>
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Overall, the theory of CoP has proved to be useful to me as an undergraduate placement student. It illustrated the realities of working in a professional setting and clarified that integration primarily depends on collective social interactions and regular active (and intentional) engagement. I felt this opportunity to learn about CoP and have a placement as part of a university module was invaluable. It allowed me to reflect on the ability to work with experienced practitioners and gain instant summative and formative feedback on my practice in a school setting. Through learning about CoP, forming these relationships in the placement, and acquiring different types of knowledge, I have familiarised myself with the dynamics of a classroom. I believe this has formed a sound basis for my Initial Teacher Training programme.

A Lecturer's Perspective

The decision to include the CoP framework in the placement module was easy. On the one hand, CoP is a well-established framework for the analysis and reflection of novices' work-placement experiences in areas where placements are

more common, such as the healthcare sector (Ranmuthugala et al., 2011; Hindi et al., 2022). On the other hand, my research into students' transitions between university and the workplace has already highlighted that this is a multidimensional transition where students must engage simultaneously with changing settings, knowledge, people and practices (Oliveira, 2017). Indeed, Grealish and Ranse (2009, as cited in Morley, 2016) had already noted that the messiness of real workplaces is not well captured by cognitive theories of learning. Therefore, exploring work-based learning experiences required a learning theory that captured the participatory and negotiated nature of these particular learning contexts. CoP's, I anticipated, could be a useful conceptual tool to use with students for its focus on learning as experience, as doing, as belonging and as becoming (Wenger, 2009). I also believe that if students were taught this framework before entering the placement, it could guide them into a more proactive approach and increase their engagement with the placement.

My expectation for the module was that using CoP as an interpretative framework would provide a conceptual map that students could use to understand their experiences, in a more encompassing manner. In my view, the CoP's theory allowed me to introduce and discuss with students the different types of knowledge that can transfer between settings, the importance of others in providing access to this knowledge, the negotiated nature of this experience, and, more importantly, the importance of students' agency in shaping this experience (Oliveira, 2017). This view is also supported by Prideaux and Starkey (2020) and Hindi et al.'s (2022) recent research where CoPs are used to assist students in understanding the multiple dimensions of workplaces. In their study, the focus was on:

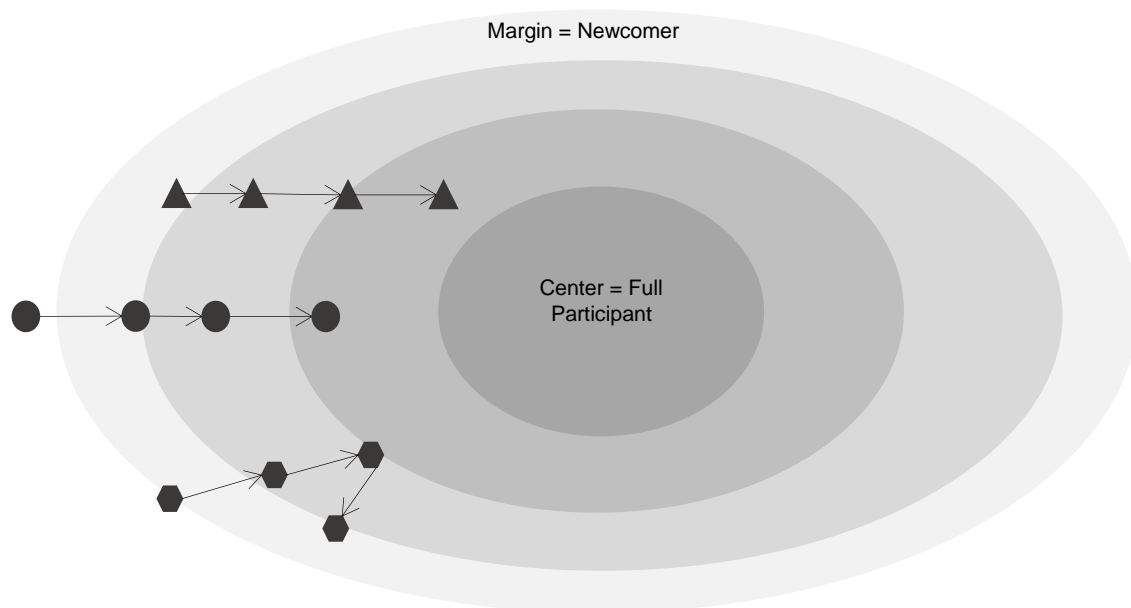
“understanding the nature of expertise, the process of movement from the university to the placement context, the tensions that arise within placements, and the ethical issues which need to be understood and articulated”. (Prideaux & Starkey, 2020, p. 114)

A critical point in the choice to include the CoP's framework in the module was to create the opportunity to discuss with students their transitions and adaptation to the placement. I wanted them to be able to explore their movement from newcomer to full(er) participant – their legitimate peripheral participation (Wenger, 2009). I wanted to validate that the trajectories that did not lead to full(er) participation were possible, acceptable and still valuable. Fundamentally, through this aim, the module offered a critical view of how placement experiences are often described and linked to lists of benefits and employability (cf. Artfield, 2021). In my view, the placement module needed to be a safe place to deconstruct and criticise notions of possessional employability (Holmes, 2003), where a placement experience is often used as a line on a CV or as an example in a job interview. The module presents placement experiences as “sites of possibility” (Urrieta, 2007) and potentially transformative.

To achieve this, I rooted the module in socio-cultural theories and reflective exercises, both individual and group, where students could explore multiple

meanings in their own experiences and also learn from others' experiences. For example, in the workshop on CoP, I encouraged students to reflect on their transition into the placement through a mapping exercise. The exercise was simple - students would track their trajectory in an "onion" diagram we completed in the workshops. In this mapping exercise, students' reflection was scaffolded with the use of questions like: "How easily do you navigate the physical spaces in the placement?" "how many people do you know in the placement?" "how confident do you feel in completing your tasks independently?" among others. The aim was to guide students' reflections into the sociocultural concepts of participation, identity, and belonging and ultimately lead the discussion into notions of pro-activity and agency.

Figure 2- Examples of Students' Placement Trajectories



Like Daya's placement trajectory presented in Figure 1, the mapping exercise revealed that students' trajectories often reflected the expected progression into the "core" (the middle) of the placements' activity, but not always. Figure 2 shows two additional examples of trajectories students shared in the workshops. The first common experience was that some students started their placement with previous knowledge of the setting. The reasons for this included students who had been a student in that setting before; students that had volunteered, worked or had done a placement in that setting before; or, students that interpreted their previous experiences as allowing them some level of insight into that type of setting.

The second, less common experience presented in Figure 2, represents students who do not straightforwardly progress to the "core". This can be explained by students experiencing some level of disengagement with the placement, which can be caused by a lack of alignment between students' expectations and reality, the recognition that the setting is not what they want to pursue professionally, or that the placement did not offer enough development opportunities. For example,

one student in the module decided to leave their placement in a charity after a few weeks and start a new one in a school to meet their interests. This was important for this particular student because, even though they were open to exploring different educational settings, the informal structure and lack of support they experienced in the charity setting reinforced their desire to work in a school.

Another reason for a less straightforward trajectory is that students can sometimes encounter obstacles in the placement that highlight or increase their marginal position. For example, one student reflected in the workshop how moving to a different classroom mid-way through the placement meant they had to learn again all the implicit knowledge of the new classroom (Eraut, 2007).

This reflective mapping exercise was useful to allow students to identify the individual nature of their experiences. The discussions around the “onion” diagrams highlighted that some students started the placement with previous knowledge of the setting, some had no prior knowledge, some moved progressively towards the centre, and some moved forwards and backwards. However, in each case, the placement experience is the consequence of these elements and their individual “onions” become a physical artefact of their trajectory and reflection. Interestingly, on a few occasions, students that had been too quick to complete the exercise asked for a new sheet so that they could account for nuances that emerged in the group’s discussions. Through the framework of CoP, theory, practice, and reflection come together in these artefacts, and they became part of

“the process of (students) being active participants in the practices of social communities and (through guided reflection) constructing identities in relation to these communities (they experienced in the placement)”. (Wenger, 2009, p. 210).

Indeed, I felt that the framework combined with the reflective activities scaffolded students towards a more meaningful and in-depth engagement with their experiences. Finally, I would like to mention that in the delivery of the module, it became clear that having the workshop sessions alongside the students’ placement hours was fundamental to supporting students to reflect and shape their placement experiences. In the discussions around the theoretical concepts and reflective activities, we were able to redefine what a successful placement experience meant. For the students in transition and me, it was no longer just about the transfer of learning and developing “soft” skills but also a much-needed process of exploration and potential development of an emerging professional identity. As a lecturer, I also aimed to spark students’ interest in transitions as an important area of action in education. I felt a sense of achievement when students who took the module chose the transition into work as a research project in their final year. The module and their placement experience had transposed the typical classroom boundaries.

Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we have used an optional placement module in higher education to explore Lave and Wenger's (1991) argument that by being part of a CoP, individuals can improve their experience of working in a particular (and new) environment. We argued that CoP as a social theory of learning is well placed to examine the transition into work placements and that CoP can offer a platform for the interpretation of placement experiences as an opportunity to nurture emergent professional identities and to strengthen students' employability as a developmental process rather than the mere acquisition of skills. Indeed, while working on this article in one of our discussions, Daya explained that it is very easy for students to take concepts and experiences at face value. However, by utilising CoP as a framework to 'understand' the placement experience, an available framework provided a reasoning behind why certain events and limitations took place. It allowed students to justify why phenomena such as time, power dynamics, and agency can impact their experiences and understand why full participation will likely not occur.

To clarify, in their social theory of learning, Wenger et al. (2002) propose that it is only with the support of the more experienced members of the CoP that newcomers overcome potential challenges and issues and become full participants themselves. As explained before, a learner can only move towards full participation in a CoP by going through a process of legitimate peripheral participation grounded in ongoing and increasing involvement in the practices of the setting (Lave and Wenger, 1991). So, CoP clarified to the students the need for an intentional engagement with the placement to achieve many of the benefits listed in the literature.

However, following the reflections by Daya and Oliveira, we need to add the caveat that enough time and opportunities for learning need to exist. It was clear that for Daya and most students, the aim of full participation was not achievable. The time in the placement was limited to a mere 35 hours, which meant that interactions and participation were limited to only a few selected hours per week. Indeed, in a recent study, Stoffels et al. (2022) identified that the duration of placements can create restrictions on the potential impact that students will experience. On this topic, Johnston (2016) explains that student teachers often maintain a status of guests or visitors in the placement due to the short duration of these experiences. For example, Hindi et al. (2022) explained that short clinical rotations in health degrees mean that students have few opportunities for active participation and mainly shadow clinicians. This more passive participation is unlikely to provide the benefits that ongoing and increasing participation towards full participation would achieve. Therefore, we argue that active engagement is key for placements to become the "sites of possibility" (Urrieta, 2007) we would like them to be and that this can be achieved through teaching students about participatory theories of learning, such as CoP.

Still on this issue, Johnston (2016) also argues that students should not be expected to become full participants in the scope of a placement opportunity. This means that there is a structural issue around the duration of placements that needs to be considered, but there is also an issue around students' expectations of what a successful placement is. In this sense, we argue that CoP, as they are explored with some level of guided discussion of the student's experiences, can be a valuable framework for reflection. They allow students to be critical of their experiences by reflecting not only on their actions, but on features of the placement and on the support they received.

This leads us to the second relevant point of discussion raised in the student and lecturer's reflections. Placement experiences require some level of guided reflection and conceptual grounding to support students' transitions and agency. Indeed, Oliveira explained how it was important that students participated in the workshops alongside their placement hours to create a dialogue between theory and practice, and encourage students towards higher levels of engagement with the placements and their reflections. An example of this was encouraging students who were merely shadowing their mentors in the placement to ask for specific activities in which they could take the lead. Daya also recognised that the workshop sessions and activities were crucial to improve the quality of his reflections on practice and, we add at this point, for practice (Ghaye, 2011).

Previous research has already highlighted that benefits could be visible even in causal work-based experiences if a reflective component was present (Shaw & Ogilvie, 2010, cited in Atfield et al., 2021). Here, we aim to contribute to this evidence with additional suggestions that reflection happens alongside the placement experience, not after, and that it is scaffolded by practical reflective activities like the "onion" diagram. Regarding this point, Daya explained that the reflective activities were almost complimentary to the placement experiences week in and week out. They allowed him to relate the real-time classroom events in the placement with theoretical concepts explored in the workshops, which guided his attention in the setting. This meant that the practical, reflective activities provided a basis for reflection and shaped his practice for either later that day or the following week.

In our experience, the activities generate better engagement from students, facilitate more in-depth reflection, and produce physical artefacts that students can return to at any point. Therefore, we argue that these pedagogical practices within placement modules harness the best of experiential learning, promoting critical self-awareness, increased student engagement and better learning outcomes than didactic teaching (Mello and Wattret, 2021).

To conclude, overall, the CoP framework suggests that the centripetal journey towards the centre of the placements' practice is anchored in mutual understanding, sustained and developed through regular interactions with "old-timers" (Woodgate-Jones, 2012, p.415), and culminates in reaching the socio-cultural centre where the newcomer is recognised as a full participant (Solomon et al., 2017). Individuals who achieve this milestone are expected to experience

enhanced confidence, proactivity and enthusiasm (Eraut, 2007, p. 415), and employability (Atfield et al., 2021).

We agree and support these claims within the scope of placement experiences in higher education and highlight the value of CoP to discuss and negotiate with students what successful and valuable placement experiences are. In addition, we also raise the importance of considering additional features of the placement experience to improve the benefits that students can experience. More specifically, in the article, we discussed the duration of the placement experience, the inclusion of a reflective approach alongside the placement, and the scaffolding of reflection via active learning activities. We expect that when all elements are aligned, lecturers and students can expect placement experiences to have a potentially transformative and long-lasting impact on students' engagement with the world of work.

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ⁱ This was the nickname students used to refer to this exercise, in true sociocultural form, where CoP's generate their own language, which is only accessible and meaningful to its members.