

Probationary Constables and their journey through a community of practice

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Abstract

This paper explores how Australian Probationary Police Constables are viewed and accepted into the workforce to become full and trusted members of a community of practice. Using Lave & Wenger's (1991) theory of communities of practice and legitimate peripheral participation, the paper explores the movement of Probationary Constables from the training Academy to the workplace, and the negotiations and strategies used for their gradual acceptance into a community of practice. Although Lave and Wenger acknowledge that peripherality, rather than being a negative term, allows for an understanding of inclusion into a community of practice, there is still a long journey to be travelled before full acceptance is accorded the newcomer. This paper traces the journey of the Probationary Constables from the periphery to more central acceptance using the 'voices' of the Probationers and their senior officers to explore the conflicts and difficulties that arose in the course of that journey.

Introduction

In the late 1990s an Australian Police Organisation instigated major changes to its training of Probationary Constables. The development and implementation of a new professional development model represented a new direction in this organisation's training and education strategies. It signalled a conscious shift from centralised training to a more integrated model involving both the Police Academy and the workplace. Such a shift was in line with developments occurring through the 1990s in other organisations involved with vocational education and training. A study was undertaken to analyse the impact of the change process over the three years of its instigation. In particular, it focused on the work-based learning of Probationary Constables in the eighteen months between Academy graduation and permanent appointment, and the activities of Sergeants, Senior Partners, Field Training Officers, the Probationary Constable Coordinator and Academy Instructors in supporting that learning.

Moving so quickly from the Academy's theoretical environment to the practicalities of the workplace was a difficult change for many to cope with and to become a confident, competent team member required the Probationary Constable to develop trust and legitimation, and to this end their chief mentors, the Senior Partners, played an important part. In this paper, the 'voices' of the Probationary Constables and their Senior Partners tell the story of the problems, the benefits, the emotions, the high and low points and the gradual development of trust and support as they undertook the learning process of becoming a police officer.

The paper opens with a discussion of work-based learning and the place of communities of practice in that dialogue. The theoretical aspects of communities of practice are explored with a greater consideration given to legitimate peripheral participation as part of that discourse, and its practical application to this police organisation. The paper then moves to explore how changes to the organisation affected the acceptance of Probationary Constables into the more experienced workforce. The community of practice plays a large role in enabling the movement of the

Probationary Constable from a position of raw beginner to fully fledged police officer with the knowledge and trust required to participate totally as a team member.

Work-based learning

Work-based learning is an area of increasing interest to researchers (Field 2000, Marsick & Watkins 1999, Matthews & Candy 1999, Boud & Garrick 1999, Billett 1999). This perspective is underpinned by the more recent philosophy that learning for work is a career long task which is embedded in the place and process of work rather than confined to an educational institution for a set period of time. In the past education and working were polarised, both being viewed as separate entities and in different time frames. Education or learning happened before entering the workplace, whilst the workplace utilised the prior learning to become productive. Currently, however, there is a shift of perspective, in that now there is greater recognition that learning occurs not only from pedagogical activities (for example, teaching and training) but also from participation in practical activities during regular work.

Candy and Matthews (1998) explore how conceptions of workplace learning are changing, but in particular they note that the terminology of workplace or work-based learning is used in a variety of ways by diverse researchers. They describe five main views of learning in the workplace (p. 16), and whilst there is overlap of all the views, it is the third view, 'the workplace as a site for sharing and creating knowledge', that is most relevant to this paper. Within this model knowledge is considered in a new light: 'Instead of the emphasis being on propositional knowledge with its implication of generalisability and universality, knowledge (or more correctly, 'knowing') is seen as constantly evolving, context-dependent and socially constructed' (p. 19). This knowledge construction happens particularly within a community of practice.

Welton (1991 p. 32) emphasises the importance of the working environment in the process of developing competency in workers in the following manner:

Working conditions nurturing learning, the development of competence and personality growth will lead to the capacity for workers to develop 'dynamic knowledge' (that is, knowledge that will not only change themselves but also develop their social and work situation).

Underlying these ideas is the assumption that a great deal of learning happens incidentally and informally during work (Marsick & Watkins, 2001, Barab & Duffy, 2000; Wenger, 1998; Garrick 1998; Harris, Willis, Simons & Underwood, 1998; Billett, 1997). The potential of work-based learning to bring about cultural as well as structural change is significant, particularly in the light of research which highlights the importance of the workplace in the development of police attitudes (for example, Richardson, 1994). Writers in this field share a belief that working, learning and innovating are closely related forms of human activity often artificially separated in conventional thinking (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Hendry, 1996; Raelin, 1998; Boud & Garrick, 1999), and see communities of practice as prime agents for learning, work, acculturation and change.

Communities of practice

It is only in the recent past that communities of practice have been thought about as a useful theoretical model. Many of the writings on communities of practice use the organisational workplace as the forum for discussion (Wenger, 1998; Lesser & Storck, 2001; Hildreth, Kimble & Wright, 2000; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002), although the concept can be applied in a variety of settings. What is significant, however, is that a good deal of the passing on of knowledge (or ways of knowing) happens in the unofficial work setting such as coffee breaks. It is in this type of setting that much of the casual knowledge of work practices is passed on and informal learning occurs.

What is of paramount importance for this type of learning to take place, however, is that the newcomer be accepted into the community of practice. What is meant by this concept is that newcomers are accepted enough to actually take part in a particular practice under the guidance of an 'expert' but without the full responsibility for that practice. As they join in the workplace activities, formal and informal, the newcomers take their place as part of the social action, learning as they do so. This is not something that happens quickly, and in some instances does not happen at all. It is in the process of social interaction that much of the learning occurs; someone who is not accepted into the community does not participate in the social and cultural activities of the group and therefore misses out on the informal learning that happens in this context. As they learn more about the practices of the community the newcomers are immersed into the culture of the workplace, slowly becoming more accepted, and most pertinently, trusted by the old-timers. This aspect of learning can only occur through legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Legitimate Peripheral Participation

Through his 'vignettes', Wenger describes life in the workplace of a medical insurance company. He uses ethnography to enlarge his theory of communities of practice, and in so doing, describes the difficulties experienced by newcomers to the practice, and the applicability of his notion of legitimate peripheral participation. Wenger has argued (1998, pp.100-101) that peripherality and legitimacy are prerequisites for participation. Peripherality means that the newcomer has access to actual practices but with reduced risk and responsibility; legitimacy ensures that the newcomer is accepted enough to be on 'an inbound trajectory', that is, s/he will progress and learning is possible. 'Granting the newcomers legitimacy is important because they are likely to come short of what the community regards as competent engagement' (Wenger, 1998, p. 101). This point is particularly pertinent to Probationary Officers in police services because of the special circumstances of their chosen profession: the journey from the periphery is more problematic for these newcomers than for most others because the journey is one fraught with danger. From the outset Probationers are sent out into the general community where they may, at any time, be confronted by danger, tension, abuse or a host of hostile situations. But where for the trainee each situation is a learning environment, the general public sees only a police officer who is expected to be able to handle any situation with 'competent engagement'. So the Probationer is dealing with competency at two levels, their own community of practice and the broader community they are there to protect.

Trust is an important part of the legitimating process for Police Probationers. Nichani (2001) in his paper on the social aspects of communities of practice pays particular attention to the notion of trust. 'Trust is the glue which binds the members of a community in a sharing and cooperating manner' (p. 3). This is particularly true of police officers, where trust becomes paramount in any tense situation, and the sharing of the action will only occur if the Senior Partner trusts that the junior officer will be able to participate competently. The challenge for both the Probationer and the Senior Partner is to assess the situation and to work out how much participation the newcomer (the Probationer) should enter into. There is a double tension here around safety and trust. The Senior Partner must assess how far the junior officer may participate without jeopardising the safety of either him/herself or the other people around. The Probationary Constable must also have trust in the Senior Partner that s/he has made the right assessment and not compromised the safety of either officer. Nichani makes the observation that trust takes space (the sharing of the experience) and time (the hours spent working together) to grow. 'Relationships built on trust cannot be hurried. They need their space and time to grow organically', Nichani states (p.3). But for Police Constables out on patrol, time is a commodity that is not necessarily available. The Probationer has to create the space for trust to develop, despite a possible lack of time in which to prove him/herself. So the legitimising of Probationary Constables as peripheral members of a community of practice is a unique and potentially problematic occurrence.

Explorations of 'managed' emotions (Hochschild, 1983; Clark & LaBeef, 1982; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987) show how many companies expect workers to present the company 'face', regardless of their own personal feelings. Expectations by the general public, on the other hand, determine that police officers will remain 'neutral', that they will not show anger at child abuse, or cry at a suicide, for example. Rafaeli and Sutton explain how police officers are expected to present themselves emotionally to gain information from criminals, and describe research that shows that the emotionally controlled experienced police officer rated better than the inexperienced recruit when dealing with domestic violence situations (p.29). But where companies such as Disney or McDonalds specify the way that workers should 'perform' (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987), for police officers most of this emotional learning takes place as part of situated learning and as part of a community of practice.

So far all this only explains emotional response in terms of public perception; it does not address the way members of the workplace responded to their own members, and especially, it does not show how those workers entered into the community of practice. As Turnbull (2000) shows, emotion plays an important role in the process of entry into a community of practice. Turnbull's critique of Wenger's analysis of situated learning outlines his failure to address the role that emotions hold in the learning process. In the case of Probationary Officers, emotions play a leading role, both in their own expression and in the dealing with others' emotions. They are subjected to some quite exceptional circumstances, but must, nonetheless, remain in control of their emotions. Part of the trust in a partner is that the partner, be they senior or probationary, is fully in control, and part of that control must include the emotions.

Overall, then, it is clear that Probationary Constables' experiences of joining a community of practice are not as clear cut as suggested by Wenger and others. The environment they find themselves in is constantly changing and may be physically threatening; decisions may have to

be made instantly and can result in dire consequences; space and time are not things that can be chosen and paced. All of these things are emotionally charged and must be negotiated by the Probationary Constables. In order for the newcomers to become legitimated peripheral participants, they must develop a situation of trust with their fellow workers, but particularly with their Senior Partner. In so doing, Probationary Officers become part of the learning community and ensure their continuing journey to full membership of the community of practice.

Learning and acceptance into the police community

Wenger (1998) is careful to make the definition of a community of practice not just as a place of learning, however informal or experiential. Not only is a community of practice a place of work practice, it is also a place where identities are formed. It is within the two processes, practice and identity formation, that learning occurs. Learning, Wenger states, 'is the vehicle for the evolution of practices and the inclusion of newcomers while also ... the vehicle for the development and transformations of identities' (1998 p. 13). It is the process of inclusion, and the development of identity as a part of the learning process that is relevant for the Probationary Constables in the context of this paper.

Although 'an occupational identity' (Unwin, 2000 p. 5) is very important for young people in establishing their sense of worth and status in an adult community, and it is certainly a motivating factor for many Probationary Constables, as Wenger asserts, identity within a community of practice is not purely about self-image. Rather 'in practice, we know who we are by what is familiar, understandable, usable, negotiable; we know who we are not by what is foreign, opaque, unwieldy, unproductive' (Wenger 1998 p. 153). The task for Probationers, then, is to become familiar with as much of community of policing as possible. As the amount of 'foreign, opaque, unwieldy' events and practices lessen, so the Probationary Constable's identity as a member of the police increases and concurrently, so his/her journey to the core of the community shortens.

One of the challenges for the incoming Probationer is to become an accepted peripheral member of the community of practice and slowly work his/her way to becoming a core member. Wenger is clear that what defines a community of practice is not necessarily the institutional boundaries, but the informal boundary which allows or excludes entry at the periphery; 'Who belongs and who does not, how the boundaries are defined, and what kinds of periphery are open are all matters of engagement in practice over time' (Wenger 1998 p. 119). It is interesting, therefore, that Probationers expressed acceptance or non-acceptance in terms of their own boundary and whether the team were aware of that boundary, rather than an awareness of the team's boundary. Thus, initially, members of the team tend to be wary of the novice, not fully knowing where the Probationer's 'boundaries' are drawn, and this "suspicion goes on until they know if they're comfortably with you or not". One novice expressed it in this way early in the probationary period:

Like my partner now, he would feel comfortable knowing what my boundaries are, but I still don't know the rest of the team that well, for some of them to know where my boundaries are. So, I mean, you can still feel it, because there're a few people in our team who are a bit hesitant if I'm around, or a Probo's around.

Several respondents suggested that some police officers are “sus on probos” until the “boundaries” have been established and the Probationary Constables have proven themselves able to work safely. It was only over time that they were able to win the trust and confidence of their colleagues.

Mentors and legitimacy

In the process of moving from the Academy to the workplace Probationary Constables are placed in a situation where they become very reliant on their Senior Partner, not only for learning the job, but particularly for gaining legitimacy within the community. Obviously within the police organisation a certain legitimacy is provided for the novice by the routinised nature of introducing Probationary Constables into the general order of the system. Nonetheless, the journey forward can be eased or made harder by the support of those he/she is working with, and in particular, the role of Senior Partner can accelerate or slow down the journey to full acceptance. Wenger notes (1998 p. 101) that in the case of apprentices, the standing of the master in the community is of prime importance in relation to the legitimisation of the apprentice as a peripheral member of the community of practice. In the case of Probationary Constables, the Senior Partner is the person with whom they spend the most time during work hours and who has the biggest influence on their learning, and, therefore, their legitimisation. One Probationer expressed this view of the importance of the role of Senior Partner:

... it's like your partner's everything, especially in the early stages of our career. Like you can pick up all bad habits because we don't really know any better, so we may think that what they're doing is the correct procedure, yet they could be taking shortcuts for everything and we're not aware of it.

This person confirmed this a year later in their second interview, “you just pray to God you get a good Senior Partner when you come out [from the Academy] who can mould you and you learn so much more”.

The novices develop under the wing and protection of their more senior and experienced team members, and the probationary period in this sense is a process of building confidence via experiential learning and gradual acceptance into the community of practice. Such a process takes time and trust in order to build a sense of belonging and to establish one's reputation. When probed for meaning, one response was:

Well, they'll do things when we're not there or they just don't want you there, and you can feel that they don't want you there ... Because they want to deal with it in their own way ... they just get a bit worried about dobbing, basically.

Eventually, however, trust builds, in the words of one Probationer, from “All I wanted to know was why did everyone basically treat me like I was an outsider or like I was a Police Complaints Authority or something!” to the point they could announce, “that actually felt good, that I was finally a part ... I wasn't just standing there like I normally do. I was actually finally a part of something. So that was good for me”.

Learning for legitimacy

The Probationers' own stories highlight the importance of self-initiated learning if they are to progress in the workplace and become a legitimate member of the community of practice. They soon came to realise that they needed to initiate the seeking out of information, as there was in the workplace, unlike the Academy, no structured program of educational experiences. Here, the daily acts of policing were the curriculum. Learning "was more hands-on when something happens, as it comes up" and the novices learnt "just as long as I'm pulling my own socks up". "You've got to go and get it yourself" was how one Probationer expressed it, while another explained: "Basically, I get a query and if I don't know how to solve it, then I'll ask someone else. Then I'll get pointed in the right direction to solve it, or I'll make further queries with other personnel".

Such self-initiated learning was heavily dependent on questioning and observation skills. A common view of learners was that

It [learning] really depends on the individual like myself being prepared to ask lots of questions so everything will come eventually, and if you don't ask lots of questions, you tend to regress and sort of do things but are not really sure or understand why you've done them and in fact do them wrong. So I have actually been asking a lot of questions...

Others realised, too, that the probationary period was the time to ask questions, "to be nosy, keeping an eye out for different things", as this was what was expected of them. In their position of novice, they could safely inquire often without others feeling burdened or perceiving them as incompetent.

Always be strong and ask hundreds of questions, especially when you are still a Probie. A Probie can get away with asking 'silly' questions more than a Constable or above. Senior Partners also expect to answer questions.

However, the dependence of learning on the asking of lots of questions was not without its drawbacks. Several interviewees recognised that not all Probationers may be so inclined or predisposed in personality: "I really think this is an individual thing and some people may not be as comfortable asking", declared one Probationer.

Learning was also greatly dependent on skills of observation.

... a lot of my, how can I put this, the best way that I've learned is probably through watching other people deal with members of the public, and supervisors and everyone else, and you just take little bits from them and incorporate them into what you think is best practice.

As with questioning, some may be better at this form of taking in information than others. One needed an eye for "seeing new things to learn from" and "looking around for yourself, trying to work things out yourself". For these novices, "everything is a surprise for you every day" such that "nearly every day I've picked up something new".

Being self-initiated meant also that they had to be careful about the emotional aspect of bothering others. They realised that their continual questioning might seem "negative" and

“pestering”, and that other team members might feel “pressured”, become “short” with them or “find it frustrating sometimes”. Attention paid to them would lessen their seniors’ “time to go about their duties”, “hold them up”, be “a burden” and result in “more downtime”. So they needed to ‘read’ each situation carefully. Probationary Constables reported that they were very aware of their status as ‘learners’ and this greatly influenced their approach to work.

These ways of learning were the established and expected processes. An example of how a community of practice operates was demonstrated when a sergeant commented, “the system itself, the way we work, you know, development within the workplace with each other, that’s always kind of worked, and if there’s a problem, people just ask people and somehow we survive”.

Asking questions, seeking alternative points of view and attempting to integrate often conflicting ideas and work practices influenced their working patterns and played a significant role in shaping how they perceived they were accepted in the workplace and into the community. As a legitimate peripheral participant, a Probationer *should* be inquiring, and seeking to learn.

Conclusion

As discussed, the learning of Probationary Constables may be interpreted from the perspective of their entering, and gaining acceptance within, a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Brown & Duguid, 1991; Hendry, 1996; Wenger, 1998).

Communities of practice may be summed up as

The relationships people strike up to solve problems (though they may be influenced by formal role relationships as well). Within communities-of-practice, people share tacit knowledge and through dialogue bring this to the surface; they exchange ideas about work practice and experiment with new methods and ideas; they engage in discussions which affirm or modify theories in use; they innovate new problem-solving routines and simultaneously manage and repair the social context. In other words, they engage in experiential learning ... (Hendry 1996 p. 5)

The respondents in this police organisation highlighted this construction of learning as experiential, shared and innovative through their identification as part of a team. The Probationary Constables were frequently reminded that “we have to act as a team ... [on a job] it’s only thee, me and the gatepost sometimes, and the gatepost isn’t going to help. I think they inherently realise the value of working as a team”.

Hendry’s theoretical definition of a community of practice was beautifully summed up in its practical application by one Senior Partner who explained the individual learning occurring within the team context:

... most of my career has been on a team basis, anything from 6 to 8 to 9 people. So you generally find that learning not only is individual but it’s also team learning, and it’s quite natural. You want to learn what your peers know, what your senior people know. So you tend to find in a lot of cases that there’s group learning. ... so you learn in a team. That’s the environment I think where you pick up more information. You’re not dealing with just one person, you’re dealing with three

or four. You pick up good bits, you pick up bits that you don't want, ... you pick up stuff that appeals to you, you pick up stuff that doesn't. Then you try and use the best of that to the best of your ability because everybody's different.

Through interacting with multiple team members with different ways of functioning, Probationary Constables learn to adapt and to synthesise aspects from these different ways to forge their own particular way of working. And through experiencing multiple work contexts, they learn to confront different clues, collect different kinds of data, use varying skills and feel different pressures (Tyre & Von Hippel, 1997). In this process, the influence of Senior Partners and the team's orientation and support were both critical in allowing the Probationary Constable to move over time from the periphery of a community of practice towards its core, there to feel accepted, respected and, most importantly, trusted. Their experiential learning is highly regarded as an appropriate way of acquiring, through the school of hard knocks, the necessary competence for appointment as a fully-fledged police officer.

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