**Understanding learning in senior public relations practices: from boundary spanning to boundary dwelling**

**Abstract**

Over the last 50 years, the social legitimacy of public relations has improved through standardising and monitoring the education and training of its practitioners. This article argues however that while successful in developing a professional development trajectory from novice to competent practitioner, the profession has struggled to fully understand the development trajectory of senior public relations practices. The diversity of occupational contexts in which public relations is practised, the condition of professional seniority and the knowledges and tools required for working at occupational boundaries is challenging for senior public relations practitioners. It is also a challenge therefore, for the profession to develop and support the learning required for senior practice beyond competency frameworks. This article suggests that socio-cultural learning theory offers a potentially fruitful way of understanding what and how senior professionals learn that requires public relations to develop a clearer conceptual understanding of the relationship between knowledge and practice. 'Communities of practice' has been influential in the fields of management and organisations (Bolisani and Scarso, 2014) but this article employs the idea of a learning process that takes place in 'constellations of practices' (Wenger, 1998) to offer a view of senior practice as boundary dwelling (Engestrom, 2009) rather than boundary spanning. Senior practitioner learning therefore, is 'situated' (Lave and Wenger, 1991) in the liminal spaces those boundaries provide and should be understood as inherently uncertain and always becoming. The article argues in consequence, there is a pressing need for senior practitioner learning to be more effectively supported by the professional group.

**Background**

Over the last 50 years, the social legitimacy of public relations has improved through standardising and monitoring of the education and training of its practitioners. However, while successful in developing a professional development trajectory from novice to competent practitioner, the occupation has struggled to fully understand and, therefore, support the professional development trajectory of senior public relations practice (L'Etang and Powell, 2013a). The absence of sufficient definitional clarity about what senior practice entails raises questions not only about the knowledges[1], skills and experiences required to operate at this level but also about how and where senior practice is learned.

As an idea, communities of practice has been influential in the fields of management and organisations (Bolisani and Scarso, 2014) and adopted as a toolkit for consultancy interested in organisational productivity, creativity and flexibility (Coakes and Clarke, 2006, Cordery et al, 2015, Laxton and Appleby, 2010). In the field of education, the idea of learning being "situated" (Lave and Wenger, 1991) in "communities of practice" (Wenger, 1998) introduced a significant shift away from the idea of learning as the acquisition of knowledge transmitted through a linear transaction. The transmission model of learning worked with an assumption of deficit at the level of the individual. Novices (members on the *periphery* of the core community) were understood as empty containers ready to be filled with reified assets by more knowledgeable practitioners (community *insiders*). Socio-cultural

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[1] While English grammar dictates that *knowledge* does not take the plural form of *knowledges*, the literature on education from which much of this conceptual framework has been derived makes the point of highlighting the distinct bodies of knowledge learners develop in practical contexts by using the term "knowledges" and thus, drawing attention to this particular theoretical point by the violation of grammatical rules.

approaches to understanding learning, on the other hand, emphasised knowledge as a social construction in which person, practice and social world were inextricably linked.

Community of practice describes a distinctive learning context in which knowledge is a product of participation in communities and constructed along three dimensions: mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire. The emphasis on the social community as the primary unit of analysis challenges the idea of knowledge as fixed and stable and the property of an individual.  A socio-cultural approach to learning in public relations suggests the need for a better conceptual understanding of the relationship between knowledge and practice in order to understand what professional seniority implies.  This work raises interesting questions not only about the diversity of occupational contexts in which public relations is practised and the learning that takes place therein as a consequence, about how senior learning might be mapped, developed, supported and authenticated, but also about where responsibility for supporting and developing it should be located.  This article draws on socio-cultural learning theory to address the following: (i) what constitutes senior professional practice (beyond its reified codification)?  (ii) How does it develop and where does it take place?

**Approaches to Learning**

The development of psychology as a modern scientific discipline in the twentieth century encouraged new thinking and research about the process of learning.  For Stimulus/Response theorists, or Behaviourists (Pavlov, 1927; Skinner, 1957), the key

motivation was external to the individual, such as reward or punishment for example. While this work produced an account of learning evidenced by changes in observed behaviours, it shed little light on how less visible functions such as thinking, understanding, and reasoning were learned or the role language and communication played in the process. Research about learning in cognitive psychology on the other hand, focussed on mental structure and the way the brain processes information to explain the internal drivers of thought and action (Bartlett, 1932), while work in developmental psychology (Piaget, 1976) looked at the relationship between intellectual development and the life course to explore learning as a sequential process. Social psychologists such as Vygotsky (1978), identified both internal and external factors as being significant to intellectual development by understanding how higher order thinking, the more abstract and complex conceptual intellectual processes, develops in the relationship between cognition and context.

This emphasis on a relationship between action and the formation of thought (Kozulin, 1998) was initially perceived to be salient only for formal school-based learning. More recent developments in professional education, however, have also begun to emphasise the usefulness of the relationship between individual cognition and social interaction for understanding the role of the workplace as a legitimate context for authentic professional learning (Webster-Wright, 2010).

**Cognition and context: situated learning**

"Rather than defining [learning] as the acquisition of propositional knowledge,
Lave and Wenger situate learning in certain forms of co-participation.  Rather than
asking what kinds of cognitive processes and conceptual structures are involved,
they ask what kinds of social  engagements provide the proper context for learning
to take place." (Foreword by William F. Hanks in Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 14)

The idea of situated learning locates the individual learner in multiple and increasingly
complex systems.  Lave and Wenger (1991) describe this as "a set of relations among
persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping
communities of practice" (p.98).  The concept of community of practice, thus, draws on
Vygotsky's (1978) attention to interactions and cognition when Lave and Wenger (1991)
observe that "learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners".  They go on to
stress however, the importance of group processes and structures when they continue,
"and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full
participation in the socio-cultural practices of community" (ibid, p. 29). Wenger's later work
(1998) introduced the more useful idea of "constellations of practices" (pp.126-128) and the
role of cognitive dissonance triggered by the tension between continuity and displacement
(p.42).  By this time, Activity Theorists such as Yrjo Engestrom ("collaborative community"),
Ann Edwards ("relational agency") and Harry Daniels (visible and invisible mediation,
communicative action, interagency work) were also grappling with the problem of
overlapping communities in different settings and how to capture knowledge mobilised by
practitioners in the process of addressing complex problems in changing work
environments.  For these activity theorists, therefore, the locus of interest was less how

practitioners develop competence as full members of a single core community — or how they become "insiders", to use Wenger's model of trajectories of participation (see below) — and more on how knowledge*s* are distributed across communities of practice in the process of generating new understandings both in and about practice*s*.

In communities of practice, learning takes place when participants engage in highly interactive practices. The notion of situated learning implies an iterative and recursive process where each *actional context* generates new meaning, understanding and learning and does not necessarily imply that in the process the learner acquires a set of fixed mental representations or *self-contained structures* (Lave and Wenger, 1991). It is precisely the *differences* that mediate new learning among co-participants engaged in activity and the necessary distribution — or perhaps more accurately — re-distribution and reconfiguration of knowledges and practices. Consequently, the approach in this article assumes that knowledge/learning is neither the property of an individual nor the property of an organisation/institution but is situated in the socio-cultural practices that shape it and thus is the property of the activity that created it. The aim in this research reported here is to explore how this different conceptualisation of knowledge and leaning can enrich the current understanding of senior public relations practice.

**Researching the practices of senior professionals**

Public Relations practitioners located in Central Scotland and the Highlands, who self-identified as senior, were invited to participate in three activities (focus group, in-depth

semi-structured interview and one-to-one mentoring) during which ideas about professionalism, professionalisation, the role of professional bodies and the notion of professional practice were also explored.

A small focus group activity comprised of experienced public relations practitioners who are considered by their community to have seniority in the field made visible a considerable gap in the provision of professional development opportunities for senior practitioners. Following on from this activity, a call for interviewees was facilitated through the professional bodies (Chartered Institute for Public Relations [CIPR] and the Public Relations Consultants Association [PRCA]) in Scotland. The resulting sample self-identified as senior and included fifteen female and twelve male interviewees from the public and private sectors working in agency and in-house contexts in a range of organisations such as global corporate, local government, public bodies, charities, lobbying and political consultancy and professional bodies. Job titles included heads of corporate affairs, public policy, corporate communication and information, public affairs, directors, managing directors as well as managers.

The interview data elicited from 27 practitioners through semi-structured interviews were analysed using qualitative analysis software (NVivo). The analytical model operationalised "community of practice" using Wenger's key themes but the addition of "seniority" generated a richer account of individual learning. This work indicates that whilst the idea of community of practice is useful for understanding how novice professionals learn, it has

insufficient explanatory power for understanding how <u>senior</u> professionals learn. However, by combining Wenger's idea of "constellations of practices" with the idea of senior public relations practice as boundary dwelling rather than boundary spanning, it is possible to make the move towards that understanding.  Boundary spanning has been extensively used in the context of management (and public relations) to refer to an organisational function of adaptation and consequently studied as strategic organizational behaviour (Aldrich and Herker, 1977; Long and Hazleton 1987) that involves bridging the organisational boundary. As such, the concept is premised on a sharp distinction between what is and is not a defining feature of an organization. More recently, boundary spanning has been studied as an individual-level competence (Williams, 2002).

This article offers a conceptualisation of boundary as the liminal space where multiple bodies of knowledge and organisational logics relevant to public relations practices (its constellations) meet, and boundary dwelling as inhabiting (rather than bridging) this liminal space.

**Senior public relations practitioners: practice, learning and knowledge**

This next section will engage with the interview data to explore the utility of the conceptual framework outlined above and develop the argument at a more synthetic level in the context of senior public relations practitioners.

**Community of practice: joint enterprise, shared repertoire, mutual engagement**

For Wenger "the source of coherence of a community is the mutual engagement of participants" (1998, p. 73).  In other words, neither the organisation, the status afforded by

position nor spatial proximity (geographic or interpersonal networks for example) is sufficient to confer community membership.  Membership of a community of practice, therefore, requires an understanding of the practices of community maintenance that enables engagement beyond the instrumental and "does not entail homogeneity" (p.75) but includes both complementary and overlapping competences.   Mutual engagement can be located in the nexus of engaged diversity, doing things together, relationships, social complexity and community maintenance.  Consequently, mutual engagement implicates both community and membership in a continuous process or practice of becoming and unbecoming (a process of continuously negotiating and renegotiating professional identities and expertise).  The process of recognising other members of the community (who do I do this with?) and constructing its coherence requires both familiarity and unfamiliarity with its routines.

> actually a lot of it is done by other people that you don't really have any control over because some of the biggest profile raising opportunities are what your chief executive does or what your [another organisation] does, you have absolutely no control over that (Marketing Manager, National Charity)

Wenger argues that spatial or temporal proximity does not necessarily confer community membership, yet this data yields some evidence of what Wenger describes as "local coherence":

An advantage in this sort of role in Scotland is that we are a reasonably tight polity community. You know the key people you need to speak to; all know each other pretty well. (Director, National Membership Organisation)

I think if I was trying to pitch some of the stories that I'm able to get in the Scottish media at the UK level, there wouldn't be any interest. Similarly… we have a good relationship with MSPs [Members of Scottish Parliament]: if we want to see them about something we get in so quickly. I think there are advantages to working in Scotland that actually kind of the accessibility is a better thing in Scotland that makes the job easier. (Head of Public Affairs, National Membership Organisation)

A further indicator of how practice operates to cohere a community is what Wenger terms "joint enterprise" — operationalised in the analysis by the question of "What is **this**?", 'this' connoting the enterprise that is senior PR practice — that involves participants in using the tools of negotiation and accountability collectively. Community of practice shares responsibility for both the negotiation of what its members do as well as being mutually accountable to the collective for what they do. The interviews indicate that whilst articulating the enterprise of senior practice is difficult (see discussion of professional seniority below), mutual accountability is complex and operates on a number of levels, not least in relation to how mutuality might be thought about as a fluid concept existing across community boundaries:

> I don't really have a peer group to draw on really … I get on really really well with my equivalent in [another organisation] and we'll sometimes put aside our organisational objective and go: "I think you did that really well or you did this really well."(Head of Public Affairs, National Membership Organisation)

> The former president of [another organisation] gave me sort of … tip off there was going to be [his members'] protest the next day because he had respect for me and knew that we worked well together with this organisation. (Head of Public Affairs, National Membership Organisation)

Wenger's third characteristic of practice as a source of community coherence and a resource for the negotiation of meaning is the repertoire of artefacts (tools that can include documents, stories, websites, symbols, routines) the community draws upon in its practice. He argues that shared beliefs are not indicative of shared practice but there may be some evidence in this research data of a connection between the two. The shared beliefs include here, for example, the role of the media, beliefs about the public sector, about health, or young people and as there does appear to be a link between belief and practice, they may be seen as mutually constitutive.

The application of the concept of community of practice to senior public relations practitioners suggests therefore, that while there is a sense of their practice (and learning) being situated in context, locating a coherent community is more elusive. The characteristic features of mutual engagement, shared repertoire and joint enterprise can be found, but are refracted through multi-professional work settings to re-situate the community to which

senior practitioners feel they belong at another level of context such as the professional or the cultural. The questions thus that need to be articulated and confronted at this stage relate to the nature of this elusive and fractured community: With whom are the senior public relations practices and beliefs shared? How do we locate the communities of practice in which senior practitioners learn and the type of knowledge activity produced?

### From community of practice to constellations of practices?

Some researchers working with the idea of community of practice as the setting for learning have pointed out its limitations and complications for empirical research (Eraut, 2002; Hughes, Jewson and Unwin, 2007), particularly in respect to professions in workplaces that depend on multi-professional teamwork, as may often be the case for public relations. Commenting on a paper about healthcare practitioners, Eraut writes,

> [The] paper challenges the notion of community of practice with evidence that occupational identity is still linked in several important aspects to membership of a profession, and a professional is a much larger and more diverse community than any community of practice […] If one defines a community as all the healthcare workers in a particular location, then multiple professions imply multiply perspectives and multiple practices, the antithesis of a community of practice' (2002, p.11)

Eraut here seems to take a very extreme position suggesting that it is impossible to reconcile different professional identifications within a shared practical enterprise (cf Edwards, 2010); this research, however, suggests that it may be fruitful to develop Wenger's later conceptualisation of *constellations* of practices (Wenger, 1998) as a way of locating

learning at the boundaries between overlapping communities where shared interests are linked in a number of ways. *Constellation* is a looser configuration than *community*: it recognises relations between individuals without imposing the requirement of a certain level of similarity, proximity, or coherence that characterise a single community of practice. Constellation thus might be based on, for example, a related rather than shared enterprise, or having membership in common, or competing for the same resource. The questions that arise are, therefore, how to recognise constellations for senior learning and the nature of the relationship on which the constellation is based.

The proposition that learning is situated in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) has been utilised in research on learning in a range of workplace environments. This work has included forms of knowledge production broadly described as oriented around craft or task-based activity such as hairdressers (Billett, 2007), butchers, midwives and tailors (Lave and Wenger, 1991) as well as forms of production oriented around professional activity (Edwards 2010; Webster-Wright, 2009) in sport (Owen-Pugh, 2007), education (Kimble and Hindreth, 2008) and health (Engestrom, 2007). At the core of this work is the notion of apprenticeship and mapping the learning trajectory from novice, (legitimate peripheral participation) to master (insider). Learning through participation at the periphery of the core community involves crafting and reproducing the already existing knowledge activities and skills of the core community guided by those who are the insiders until mastery has been achieved

> Legitimate peripheral participation provides a way to speak about the relations
>
> between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and

communities of knowledge and practice.  It concerns the process by which

newcomers become part of a community of practice.  A person's intentions to learn

are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of

becoming a full participant in a socio-cultural practice. (Lave and Wenger, 1991,

p.29)

Much of this earlier work focusing on professional novices such as nurses, junior doctors, or

teachers assumed the participation of more senior professional colleagues who were

spatially and temporally coterminous with the more novice practitioners (Daniels et al,

2010).


Thus while the notion of the community of practice and of legitimate peripheral

participation has some traction here, when it comes to professional learning in the

workplace, and particularly as it applies to senior practitioners, the concept may function

more as an imagined community (Anderson, 1983): it may function as Wenger has also

suggested (2000) as a mental map and a point of reference more powerfully than a physical,

co-located community.  It may also be useful, therefore, to consider the possibility of

community of practice existing for practitioners at boundary crossing points (individual/

organisational/professional). The development of senior expertise, requires a tolerance of

what might be considered 'outsider' knowledges and practices (or *il*legitimate peripheral

participation). In short, the article explores how public relations practice and learning, and

senior practice and learning in particular, can be seen as relational, the nature of

relationships which bring the practices together, and the implications this might have for

supporting the development of senior practice.  The next section of the article therefore,

returns to the experiences of senior practitioners in a more phenomenologically sensitive way to reconstruct its inherent logic.

**The condition of professional seniority**

"It's just not acceptable to make mistakes at senior level … not an option"

(Communications Director, Statutory Organisation)

As a term senior is deployed commonly in public relations although it is not clearly defined and therefore intrinsically problematic from a realist perspective (but see Sha, 2011).  In earlier research (L'Etang and Powell, 2013b) however, the term resonated with practitioners because it has been employed within the occupation for decades and connotes a value that it was important to explore and understand.  Consequently, in the 27 interviews analysed here the term "senior" formed the basis for discussion on practitioner conceptualisations of what constitutes senior practice beyond that conferred either within or by organisational or professional structures such as job title, position within an organisation, status of an organisation and so on.  Interviewees were encouraged to confront these challenges and to reflect on past experience and develop reflexive thinking with regard to their experiences.

As a coding theme therefore, *Seniority* pulled together material where attempts were made to articulate the distinctiveness or particularity of senior practice.  The most commonly constructed explanations rely on the notion of strategic work and an ability to operate at the strategic level. In such explanations, however, public relations specialist knowledge activity or level of performance was frequently juxtaposed with more generic and routine

communications knowledge activity, described as "front line" work (Director, National Membership Organisation), such as responding to the press, or "craft" work (Freelance, Political Consultancy).

> dealing with the press can quite routinely be done at quite a junior level, what you need to be confident in is if something is coming up that does involve [something new or] controversy it is being spotted and escalated … and if there's tricky judgment to be made (Director, National Membership Organisation)

Unpacking the concept of senior practice made visible some of its dimensions that included the range of skills such as performing a boundary spanning role in relation to bodies of specialised knowledge (e.g. working side-by-side with management practitioners or politicians); strategic positioning and direction for a client organisation (e.g. reading the organisation's environment and its stakeholders); making judgments that involve risk (both to practitioner's and organisation's reputation) and of having more responsibility (to the organisation):

> It is the ability to do lots of normal activities communications professionals do … in a highly proficient way. [It is] about having that understanding but then taking it into a different level where you are fitting into …what the organisation is trying to achieve [and] seeing past [it to appreciate] the unintended consequences that may arise from this piece of work [and] being able to mitigate potential risks. (Freelance, Political Consultancy)

While senior practice is thus built on a range of common technical competences, it goes beyond that by bringing in an outside perspective, or even multiple perspectives, to span not only the organisational boundary but also the time horizon, i.e. choosing how to act in the present by reaching into the future through the concept of risk and scenarios of the imagined future.  The boundary spanning role extends beyond connections with organisations in the external environment to intelligence gathering and, effectively, to reshaping of the external environment as such:

> [The client organisation] want[s] you to be thinking strategically about their business and making connections that they are maybe not able to make because you're in a different network, or multiple networks…' (Board Director, National Public Relations Agency)

Nevertheless, while senior-level performance can be characterised by its high position in the organisational hierarchy, senior practitioners' power is simultaneously and paradoxically precarious.  One interviewee described, or more accurately "spill[ed] out" (Communications Director, Statutory Organisation), a recent decision made by the senior management team, of which she was a member, to cut PR from its ranks.  It was a decision she agreed with in the financial context of the organisation but the consequences for her capacity to deploy public relations knowledges and skills at the senior level of the organisation had been seriously undermined as a consequence.  Another interviewee expressed senior precarity thus:

It's not just about 'Oh, we've got our boardroom table position now, it's all over'…

because you'll get pushed out just as quickly as you get in if you [are not] part of the

value chain of the organisation. (Freelance, Political Consultancy)

The same sense of tension can be seen in the way in which seniority is not a secure position

a practitioner comes to *occupy* in the professional or organisational hierarchy, but rather it

is a constant *public performance* of seniority that achieves success for the organisation:

I'm intensely conscious that it is my duty to win things for [my organisation]. And

that that is actually how I continue to be able to put food on the table for my

children [and what] my career progression is entirely dependent on. (Director,

National Membership Organisation).

Yet, the *work* public relations performs must remain private and behind-the-scenes: "most

successful [PR] is invisible." (Communications Director, Statutory Organisation)

Perhaps the key to understanding the distinctiveness of senior-level public relations practice

is the notion of *judgment*, the ability to make the right call about the position or course of

action the client organisation should take:

You have to be able to learn to make decisions […] you have to basically make a

judgment. […] I'm asked by the chief executive 'What do you think we should do?'

then I have to say, well this is what I think we could do. … I mean sometimes I don't

really know, but you have to be able to weigh up the pros and cons. (Marketing

Manager, National Charity)

[What] makes a senior practitioner successful? I think there is a degree of

discernment about knowing where you can win [for your organisation]… .To do that

consciously as issues arise is to think what can we win, what's our specific achievable

result […] and also I can give [the organisation] a reasonable prospect of [what's]

achievable. What else comprises a senior practitioner? I think a lot depends on

personal credibility and ability to sustain relationships of integrity with a wide range

of other people. (Director, National Membership Organisation)

This was echoed during other interviews and one in particular suggested the very invisibility

of successful public relations practices was a problem in terms of evidencing the value of

these professional expert judgments: "[but] how do you measure strong relationships?"

(Communications Director, Statutory Organisation)

While some interviewees found it difficult to account for the ability to accomplish senior-

level performance, on the whole perhaps the most significant factor appears to be

*experience*, although formal qualifications, training, and a particular kind of cognitive

capacity also come into play:

… that's just time and experience and examples. […] Sometimes I look at other Heads

of Communications [and] they haven't done the CIPR Diploma[2]. How did they get

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[2] Qualifications offered by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations, usually but not exclusively taught by Higher Education institutions.

there? ... You don't have to do that to get to these jobs but I think it's very helpful.

(Marketing Manager, National Charity)

It's a combination of skill development and experience, the length of time, but it's also again to do with an innate quality … a sort of rolodex … in your mind where you can quickly flick back and forward and think [and] make connections quite fast.

(Board Director, National Public Relations Organisation)

According to these interviewees, thus, it appears that learning in practice is privileged over other ways of learning. If being able to perform as a competent practitioner represents a learning journey, the road can be scaffolded, i.e. made navigable, within the workplace by more senior colleagues who may offer opportunities to perform with a greater level of independence or in a wider range of roles. Alternatively, it can be managed by the learners themselves by moving between organisations and jobs so that each move opens new opportunities for learning. However, if the journey from novice towards competent practitioner ('insider' in Wenger's terms) appears fairly well understood, the question of how and what senior practitioners learn is more problematic. From this preliminary analysis, it would appear that senior practitioners' learning trajectory takes them outside the boundary of public relations (away from operating only as an insider) and directs attention to other specialised bodies of knowledge and practices:

Senior practitioners really need to understand what their organisation is about which means they need to get to the broader skills around finance, marketing, people management. (Freelance, Political Consultancy)

Depending on the person, I think it could be managing staff, performing appraisals; if you are in a consultancy, knowing about … how to budget, revenue, profit forecasting…. being trained to become a trainer …(Director, Global Public Relations Organisation)

it's not PR any more … all about managing people (Director of Communications, Statutory Organisation)

The question at this point is whether public relations specialists have anything new to learn about communication and if they learn, how does this happen? This research data offers some indications that given their public exposure and pressure for success mentioned earlier, senior practitioners may experience learning as a lonely, uncomfortable, and possibly risky business:

My view with senior people is that the one-on-one tuition would be helpful, mentoring from senior people because I think once you get to a certain level, you are meant to know absolutely everything [and yet] you are always learning, that's what this job is about. … I mean things like this, you and me now. That's quite useful to my professional development…. I've spoken to quite a few senior people who've said that it's very difficult to go out and do a course if you don't want to show any sign of weakness. (Director, Global Public Relations Organisation)

Senior practitioners' learning therefore, has a trajectory that does not fit comfortably with the craft model described earlier yet it clearly also needs to be understood as situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The next two sections offer a way forward by combining

Wenger's typology of learning trajectories (1998) with research in professional education

(Edwards, 2010, Webster-Wright, 2010, 2009) and activity theory (Engestrom, 2009).

**Towards an understanding of senior professional learning**

In his chapter on identity in practice Wenger argues "identity in practice arises out of an interplay of participation and reification … not an object, but a constant becoming. […] As we go through a succession of forms of participation, our identities form trajectories" (1998, pp.153-154).  He identifies five trajectories that describe five patterns of participation: peripheral, inbound, insider, boundary and outbound (Wenger, 1998).  The most salient for the purposes of this argument are the insider trajectory that describes full membership of a single community and the boundary trajectories that describe participation in multiple communities. Boundary trajectories — described by Wenger (1998) as a form of participation where value is located "in spanning boundaries and linking communities of practice" (p.154) — are particularly salient for understanding the learning of senior professional public relations practitioners.  Identity is a key element of Wenger's account of community of practice as a unit of analysis and for those with boundary trajectories, "sustaining an identity across boundaries is one of the most delicate challenges of this kind of brokering work" (p. 154). Edwards' (2010) work on becoming an expert professional also suggests that a professional trajectory locates the insider only at the midway point and the move to expert requires the development of autonomy beyond the boundaries of specific organisational and knowledge domains.

In her critique of existing models of professional development, Webster-Wright (2009) claims little is known about how professionals continue to learn throughout their working lives. Education and learning in the context of the professional project has thus far focused on the identification of appropriate bodies of abstract knowledge (DiStasio et al, 2009; Fitch, 2014) and educational or training programmes which instil this knowledge into individual practitioners under the eye of the master, a more senior practitioner or teacher who guides the learner through this process (Pieczka, 2002). This view of learning, however, becomes problematic when it comes to practitioners who have attained more senior positions or levels of practice and thus may struggle to identify the resources they need to develop their expertise.

The professional peer group has an important role to play in supporting the professional learning of novice practitioners and scaffolding the movement from the periphery to the inside. The scaffolding metaphor refers to the Vygotskian idea of learning as a supported movement through each individual's 'zone of proximal development' and the process of mentoring might usefully be thought of in this way. However, there is a gap in understanding about the knowledge and learning required for senior professional public relations practice. If it is the act of changing participation in the culturally designed settings of everyday life that provokes learning (Lave, 2008) and if seniority is a more complex and autonomous phenomenon that cannot be scaffolded like the progression from novice to insider, how do senior public relations practitioners account for performance of their boundary identity? This preliminary analysis suggests that while the inbound trajectory and the insider identity are reasonably clearly supported through workplace structures (enabling

communities of practice to develop within departments or teams), senior practitioners

seem to operate in multidisciplinary communities of practice (typically with senior managers

or important organisational stakeholders) thus on the boundary between their own core

community and other constellations. This can be illustrated in the interview material shown

earlier which makes distinctions between craft work and strategic work, in references to

networking and making intellectual connections between problems, bodies of knowledge,

and solutions encountered in different contexts.

The picture emerging from this discussion of knowledge and learning has brought the

argument to the point where senior practitioners need to be understood as functioning in

two ways.  In the core public relations communities of practice they function as community

insiders in terms of their role in scaffolding the learning of community entrants and mid-

level specialists.  For senior practitioners' own learning however, they need to be

understood as functioning in constellations of practices.  The concluding section offers an

outline of such an approach.

**Some conclusions about senior-level learning: from boundary spanning to boundary dwelling**

In presenting this account of the way in which a particular theoretical approach has been

combined with supporting empirical evidence to explore the nature of what is commonly

referred to as senior-level public relations practice and knowledge, a number of provisional

conclusions can be drawn that are presented in this final section of the paper.

A broadly socio-cultural approach to learning may be fruitful in developing an understanding of professional seniority in public relations and senior-level practice. It has helped to highlight a gap in understanding what senior practitioners know and how they learn in relation to how they practice.  It is argued here that the use of concepts such as community of practice, and specifically core community of practice, is useful for understanding the relationship between the context of organisational public relations practice and the individual development of professional knowledge and repertoire. At the same time, however, this article argues that of itself the concept has insufficient explanatory power for understanding how the knowledge and skills required at senior level are developed. Here the article suggests that by focusing on the constellations of practices (Wenger, 1998) in which senior members participate it might be possible to account for senior level learning and map multiple trajectories of participation, including illegitimate peripheral participation, and learning that happens in these contexts. It enables a conceptualisation of the development of senior practice not as a vertical step leading to a higher stage or level but more "a terrain of activity to be dwelled in and explored, not just a stage to be achieved or even a space to be crossed" (Engestrom, 2009, p. 312).  In this way, attention is drawn to the importance of leveraging its emergence in multiple communities for the purposes of learning.

Although it has not been possible to develop this part of the discussion in this article, combining ideas about "knowledge activity" or "knowing in action" (Amin and Roberts, 2008), Engestrom's  (2008) "collaborative community", and Edwards's (2009, 2010)

"relational practice" offers a potentially fruitful way forward. The first of these argues against the over-simplistic treatment of knowledge and offers a typology of different kinds of knowledge (and learning) relevant to professional action (craft or task-based knowing; epistemic or high creativity knowing; professional knowing; and virtual knowing to do with relationships) combined with and argument for the need to distinguish between them at the analytical level. This, in turn, directs attention to the importance of collaboration in creating knowledge *and* learning. Finally, Edwards draws attention to an increasingly pressing need for practitioners to be able to make their specialist knowledges and practices visible to themselves as well as others, but subject to negotiation if they are to create new knowledge in collaboration with other practitioners with shared interests.   Autonomy therefore, and professional seniority, might be thought of more usefully as neither a property of the individual or the organisation but a product of the community of practice through which (rather than in which) it was created.   Consequently, further research is needed to explore the following two questions that arise at this point:  What type of knowledge community is this?  What are the shared interests of senior PRPs?

This article argues that senior practitioners pose a particular problem to existing explanations of public relations knowledge and learning: this research has found indications of loneliness, a sense of a disorientation, and a yearning for definitive answers as to what senior practitioners need to know, as well as a perception that they are not catered for in terms of training and development by their professional organisations:

I don't think the profession has sufficiently communicated itself as an actual

generator of ideas as opposed to the seller of ideas [Director, National

Representative Organisation]


…to some extent the industry in Scotland as well as elsewhere is guilty of

perpetuating a very narrow perception of what PR is [Director, National Public

Relations Organisation]


I'm not sure it's a matter of going on a course … sometimes it is literally lived

breadth of experience [and] quite a depth of knowledge [Director, National Public

Relations Organisation]


I mean I had probably thought the CIPR would have more of a space for that

[reflexive practices].  I don't find they have [Communications Manager, National

Charity]


The experiences of senior practice, and of dwelling in the boundaries of constellations of

practices, is often felt as individual deficit and a challenge to the legitimacy of seniority "I

think I'm going to be found out any day" (Communications Manager, National Charity). This

article argues however, that these experiences should be reinterpreted as positive, i.e. they

need to be understood and accepted as a fundamental presence: being a senior public

relations practitioner means operating outside the comfort of one's single community of practice and requires leveraging different contexts of practice for the job of constant knowledge creation.  Rather than boundary spanning, therefore, senior practice might more usefully be thought of as boundary dwelling and its practitioners constituted as boundary learners.  In this formulation, senior practitioner learning requires moving beyond the comfort of the core of the public relations community, to participate on the peripheries of other knowledges, practices and organisational domains in environments of mutual trust.  It may be useful therefore, to move away from the idea that the uncertainties experienced by senior practitioners implies deficit and to embrace instead the legitimacy of those peripheral participations beyond reified boundaries.

It seems appropriate to finish by echoing Webster-Wright (2010) in the call for a model of authentic professional development that supports self-directed learning predicated on questions of ontology (What *is* this I am doing?) and professional identity (where does what I am currently doing belong?), one that listens to the experiences of practices. The view of senior practitioners as boundary dwellers put forward in this articles suggests that appropriate professional development for senior practitioners may need to look very different to that offered to other types of practitioners, such as novices or insiders (entry and mid-level specialists).  While learning for the latter groups can be scaffolded as communication management-specific competences, learned in appropriate communities of practice (work, training, education); senior level learning may require "inner" scaffolding, a high level of reflexivity that recognises it is their participation in the different constellations of practices that creates new knowledges.  This, in turn, can be seen to involve perspective

shifting achieved through internalised or externalised ways. The first can be understood as a capacity for disciplined observation and inquiry that can be developed with the help of appropriate tools for the development of professional reflexivity (different forms of writing being perhaps the most obvious suggestion); the second refers to learning of a dialogic type, prompted by external inputs in appropriately structured small group simulations, discussions or mentoring sessions that rely on listening, curiosity and open engagement with the other.  Senior level learning, thus, requires environments of high levels of trust to be created so that barriers created by professional competition or fear of reputational risk can removed.

Finally, it could also be argued that appropriate provision needs to be made for concept-led learning as this is fundamental to the creation of a body of professional knowledge (Pieczka and Powell, 2016) whether one works within its boundaries or across them.  This has a number of consequences.  Firstly, attention is drawn to the responsibility of the professional group to promote higher order thinking across constellations of practices rather than on problem-solving in professional/organisational practice.   Secondly, there is a need for spaces that offer the opportunities for concept-led learning in reflexive environments where boundaries can be explored and uncertainty is valued (through academic research for example).

Senior professional learning requires a mechanism for creating shared identity and a shared enterprise despite the strong centrifugal force created by the permanent positioning of

professional seniority in multiple practice spaces.  Here the role of professional associations

can be particularly important in enabling senior practitioners to be seen as those with the

power to enable the novice and insider learning trajectories and to articulate the

appropriate professional standards for these practitioners.  More importantly perhaps,

professional associations should develop a new model of learning that enables senior

practitioners to function autonomously as boundary learners who create new knowledges

and practices in the liminal spaces of their everyday professional lives.  This perhaps, is the

most useful senior competence of them all.

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