From Careers Adviser to Personal Adviser: Emotion, Ethics, Politics and Learning in a Disrupted Community of Practice

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Abstract: This paper discusses recent policy reforms in career guidance for young people in England. It offers a case study of disruption to an established community of practice; presents evidence of its emotional, ethical and political effects; considers the implications for workplace learning and reconsiders theoretical conceptualisations of 'communities of practice'.

Communities of Practice, Learning as Becoming, and the Dynamics of Social Participation

In recent years, interest has grown among adult education researchers in using the concepts of situated learning and 'communities of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) in order to understand workplace learning. Such a perspective treats learning as a process of becoming and belonging, of membership and identity; that is to say, as a process of social participation. Novices are viewed as engaging initially in 'legitimate peripheral participation' alongside experienced 'old-timers', and moving over time towards 'full participation' themselves.

Understanding of the *dynamics* of participation in communities of practice is, however, far less developed. They are usually assumed to be unidirectional, and studies within this theoretical framework have focussed predominantly on initial entry to professions, on 'becoming' and then 'being' (Colley et al., 2007). Lave & Wenger's (1991) original focus on novices' learning has since been extended to consider processes of exclusion for would-be entrants (Wenger, 1998; Colley, 2006b); boundaries between multiple communities of practice (Fuller & Unwin, 2003); and the impact of already-experienced adults entering a new community of practice (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004). However, any alternative dynamics, such as the *outward* movement of full members from a community of practice, have largely been neglected.

One exception is a previous study (Colley et al., 2007) which explored the decisions of tutors in English colleges of further education (similar to community colleges in the US, or TAFE colleges in Australia) to quit their profession. These decisions were often taken, very painfully, as the implementation of national and local policies based on economic competitiveness eliminated the space which tutors had fought to preserve, in order to enact pedagogies to which they had a deep commitment, such as those based on a politics of social justice. This paper reports a more recent study, funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council. It investigates the case of a community of practice that has experienced a high level of disruption as a result of national and policies and their local implementation: the career guidance profession working with 14-19 year olds in England.

14-19 Career Guidance in England: a Disrupted Community of Practice

14-19 career guidance in England has undergone several major restructurings over the last 15 years. From 1973, a national careers service, based in local education authorities, had provided a universal service to all young people in schools and colleges. In 1994, this service was privatised and fragmented into over 70 competing local companies. Following the election of the New Labour government in 1997, careers companies were expected to 'refocus' their resources on 'disaffected' youth. In 2001, they were incorporated whole scale into a new youth support service, *Connexions*. This was a generic service, nationally co-ordinated, but delivered locally in

different ways. It also included youth workers, social workers, education welfare officers and others, who were seconded from other 'home' services to which (unlike careers advisers) they could return. It was strongly targeted at young people who were not in (formal) education, training and employment (NEET), or at risk of so becoming. Without discrete careers services in England, there was no longer a core specialist infrastructure for the profession, nor any national organisation within the 14-19 system that had career guidance as its main remit (DfES, 2005a; Watts, 2006b). The most recent reforms, in April 2008, abolished the national *Connexions* service and devolved its funding back to local authorities' Childrens' Trusts (responsible for all forms of 0-19 provision), re-fragmenting it into a variety of ownership and delivery models that is still proliferating.

At the same time, the role of English careers advisers has substantially changed. Policies claim to promote a more holistic and personalised approach to youth support, and all practitioners working in *Connexions*, including careers advisers, have been re-designated as 'personal advisers' (PAs), supposedly creating a 'new profession'. PAs' role was supposed to centre on mentoring young people through long-term, caring relationships in order to engage them with formal education and training systems. Government-set targets focus on working with young people in or at risk of entering the 'NEET' group, and dealing with issues such as drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and mental health issues alongside career-related issues. The service is tiered, and clients are prioritised through processes of triage and tracking. Most resources are devoted to young people deemed to need 'intensive support', then to those with 'medium' support needs; far fewer resources are allocated for work with 'mainstream' youngsters deemed to need 'minimum support'. However, findings from a national survey conducted at the start of our project show that, at best, only half of the promised number of personal advisers have been employed in *Connexions*, leaving it drastically under-resourced (Lewin et al, 2009); and public spending on career guidance in this sector has been reduced by 15.5% not accounting for inflation (McGowan *et al.*, 2009).

Many concerns have been raised about the reduced capacity of *Connexions* to provide career guidance, and to offer the universal service to which all young people are still legally entitled (see, for example, NAO, 2004; Mulvey, 2006). However, so far little research attention has been paid to the impact of these reforms on the career guidance profession itself, although the location and status of the career guidance profession have shifted in an unprecedented way. The study focuses, therefore, on what these changes mean for the professional roles, identities and practices of careers advisers and – more broadly – for the dynamics of professional participation in communities of practice; that is to say, for practitioners' own learning and for the capacity of the profession as a whole.

Methodology

The study primarily used narrative 'career history' interviews to investigate the experiences of 26 practitioners who had trained as careers advisers and had subsequently been employed as personal advisers (PAs) in *Connexions*. All were volunteers. Participants were selected in equal numbers from three different 'eras' of training and lengths of experiences. Two thirds were still working as personal advisers in three local *Connexions* services (these also kept time-use diaries for two weeks), and one third had chosen to leave *Connexions* and seek employment elsewhere. Reflecting the overall gender balance in this caring profession, about 80% of the sample was female. This paper draws on narrative syntheses (Moustakas), or emplotments (Polkinghorne) constructed from these career histories. We present narratives

which typify different dynamics of participation in the community of practice of career guidance – becoming, unbecoming, and not-becoming – that emerged from the data.

Yvonne: From Being to Unbecoming

Yvonne trained as a careers adviser many years ago. She now works in *Connexions* as an 'education PA', but resists that designation. She still regards herself as a careers adviser, and tries to ensure that she is viewed as such by clients, parents, the schools in which they worked, and other youth support professionals. She is employed in a service strongly led by the management of the former careers company, which resisted the national policy emphasis on targeting young people who are 'NEET'. It is located in an affluent borough, with many high-achieving schools, and a very low rate of non-participation by young people. Headteachers continue to express a strong demand for a universal career guidance service for their pupils, and the *Connexions* service has been committed to meeting this demand.

Although Yvonne feels that her role in *Connexions* has widened, she also feels that it has been undermined. A very high caseload means that she now cannot see all the young people in her schools, compromising the universal service, yet she believes that all young people have a need for career guidance. (The exclusion of this need from policy definitions of young people's needs was a recurrent theme in many of our interviews with 'education PAs'.)

Liaison with schools now focuses more on the triage of each cohort, to identify priority clients, rather than on supporting curriculum development, and careers education programmes have often been much reduced. As a result, pupils do not have access to information about educational and career opportunities, and are sometimes misinformed by teachers. This makes it difficult for Yvonne to practice in-depth guidance with individual pupils, as she has to spend most of her time with them explaining the basics of their options, or correcting misconceptions. In addition, while she feels better equipped to 'broker' other services to meet young people's health and social needs, there seems to be confusion in those services about the role of *Connexions* PAs. They often resist or refuse her referrals of young people, expecting her to deal with issues that she does not feel qualified or competent to address.

Yvonne is concerned about the fact that in *Connexions*, careers advisers no longer have a remit for working with employers and visiting workplaces. She feels de-skilled by this loss of local knowledge, and believes it weakens the guidance she can give. Paradoxically, it may be increasing the risk that they will drop out of placements and enter the 'NEET' group. Since reincorporation into the local authority, she is particularly concerned, like others in her service, about proposals to break up the *Connexions* infrastructure and place one or two PAs in a series of area-based multi-agency health and social care teams, which are most likely to be led by managers with no knowledge of career guidance. She is worried that this isolation will further undermine her professional practice, since colleagues and managers qualified in career guidance play a vital role in her continuing professional development (CPD). Yvonne's narrative of gradual unbecoming resonates very strongly with many others from our interviews.

Not Becoming

Beth is a younger 'community PA' who trained as a careers adviser two and a half years ago, knowing that she would seek employment with *Connexions*. She came to work for a service with a strong reputation for embracing the ethos of a more holistic and innovative youth support service, which she supports. Although she views career guidance as important, she sees her role in *Connexions* as very different from the one for which she trained. In fact, she claims that she has not become a careers adviser at all, but more of a 'social worker'. She is glad to have found

herself in this role, and feels it is very positive and rewarding. This process of 'not becoming' a career adviser, although having trained for the role, is echoed by other respondents who moved straight from their initial training into work as a 'community PA'.

Whilst enjoying her job, Beth also believes that it is in many ways 'impossible', because of a mismatch between targets for reducing 'NEET' and the lack of resources available. She finds it hard when she cannot devote the time she knows is needed to help a young person. With very large caseloads, PAs are constantly forced to make difficult ethical decisions about which young people they can help. They often prioritise youth who are likely to move more quickly into EET destinations, so that they can meet their targets; but this happens at the expense of those needing more intensive and lengthier support. Thus, a service supposedly designed to focus on the most vulnerable young people actually has the opposite effect.

Sometimes Beth tries to resist these pressures; for example, she spent most of her time one week trying to support a young man who was homeless, without being able to find him shelter. Like Yvonne and others, she found that other services would not accept her referral, in this case because they claimed difficulties in engaging the young man on previous occasions. This makes Beth feel that there is confusion within and beyond *Connexions* about the role of PAs, and unrealistic expectations that they will deliver all the support required for the hardest-to-help young people. She is frustrated that PAs have to record young people's problems, and spend a great deal of time in surveillance and monitoring – even to the point of physically 'chasing' them – whilst the resources to solve their problems are not available. Her role, she says, has more aspects of social control or 'fire fighting' than empowerment.

This also makes the work very emotionally draining, resulting in anxiety and sleepless nights when problems such as homelessness cannot be solved. Beth feels that there is no official support mechanism for these emotional pressures. (Although 'support and supervision' is formally provided for *Connexions* PAs, many of our respondents told us that it is provided by their line manager, and tends to focus on progress towards targets, sometimes with a disciplinary aspect to it.) She explained that PAs rely on each other for peer support, leaving mobile 'phones on overnight and at weekends, and helping each other out with their caseloads. She has seen a colleague suffer emotional 'burn-out', and is aware that her own resilience and enthusiasm for the job may be compromised when she has been in the job longer.

Deeper Becoming, then Unbecoming

Wanda had worked for many years as a careers adviser. At the time of her research interview, she had already quit *Connexions* once, returned because she could not find satisfactory alternative work, and was again trying to leave. In the former careers service, she had always been committed to working with disadvantaged young people, but was often frustrated by the lack of resources for this, and by weak links with other youth support services. When introduced in her area, the *Connexions* service provided other youth support directly, but subcontracted the delivery of career guidance to a former careers company. The latter retains its independent infrastructure, but careers advisers' work in the field was co-located with other *Connexions* PAs. Wanda therefore welcomed the founding of *Connexions*, the additional resources it promised, and the closer collaboration it facilitated between herself and other professionals. Indeed, she argued that it enable her to focus more strongly on career guidance than ever before. She was able to maintain and develop her career guidance expertise within a close-knit community of careers

advisers at the careers company base, and to draw on networking and expert support from other professionals in her work with clients.

Wanda's later disillusionment and decisions to leave were prompted by an ever-increasing institutional emphasis on meeting policy targets to reduce the number of young people classified as 'NEET' by getting them as rapidly as possible into formal education, employment or training (EET). She felt that this militated against their best interests, and against an appropriate professional relationship with her clients, especially the time and sensitivity needed to engage with them. Her distress at this situation this is compounded by the lack of adequate opportunities, whether in education and training, or in housing, drug rehabilitation or health care, to meet the needs of young people facing serious social and economic problems. Like Beth, she feels the job has become impossible, and wants once again to get out.

Similar issues to all those discussed above – loss of expertise and status, confusion about individual and service roles, excessive caseloads, lack of resources to meet young people's needs, individual resistance, emotional distress and burn-out, and ethical dilemmas – were also raised by other careers advisers who had chosen to leave *Connexions* (usually to enter career guidance in another sector such as further or higher education).

Discussion and Conclusions

This case study of the career guidance profession has major implications for policy and practice relating to adults' learning in the workplace. Firstly, it provides evidence of de-skilling and the inhibiting or diminishment of expert knowledge, which are of particular concern in a profession that requires up-to-date knowledge of constantly changing qualifications systems, opportunity structures and labour markets in order to be of high quality and effectiveness. This gradual process of 'unbecoming' can derive in part from changes in the practitioners' role itself (e.g. ending employer liaison work, school liaison focused on client triage rather than curriculum development). It may also result from insufficient formal CPD; and from the disappearance of less formal learning opportunities, if the loss of a dedicated infrastructure prevents regular networking among other colleagues and managers with career guidance expertise. Wanda's case, however, offers evidence that a specialist infrastructure, combined with co-located multi-agency working in the field, provides an environment in which each particular profession might find support and development, and client needs might be served most effectively.

Secondly, there is evidence that some practitioners, though trained in career guidance with public funding, do not go on to become expert careers advisers, but develop into a pseudo-social work role through their job allocation within *Connexions*. Not only does this 'not becoming' represent a loss of capacity for the career guidance profession in the 14-19 sector, and further restrict universal access by young people to career guidance which they sorely need. It also raises questions about the appropriateness of such practitioners to undertake such practice with young people who face considerable problems. In the UK, social work is a restricted profession, and practitioners must undertake specialist training, hold an appropriate qualification, be registered, and have regular clinical supervision. Not all 'Community PAs' in *Connexions* meet the same requirements, yet – questionably – they are handling complex cases, some of which social services themselves have failed to resolve.

Thirdly, as discussed by Colley (2001, 2003) in the early days of *Connexions*, the rhetoric of a holistic support service for young people, founded on the notion of a 'personal adviser' who would build long-term, trusting relationships with young in their care, appears to carry significant emotional costs for practitioners in a context where the service is severely under-resourced. This

presents risks to the practitioners and to their clients, and we have some evidence that 'burn-out' is leading some to quit the profession.

Fourthly, in order to manage excessive caseloads and meet targets, practitioners must engage in constant triage and surveillance of their clients. They face daily ethical dilemmas about which young people will receive help and which will not; and also about engaging in practices which go beyond the boundaries of their own professional competence and service resources – ethical anathema to anyone trained in guidance and counselling. More in-depth research is required to understand how, and on what basis, such decisions are made, but we already know that practitioners feel under pressure both to support the more tractable youth in their care, and to place young people in destinations which they fear are not suitable or sustainable.

Fifthly, this raises issues about the socio-political purposes of career guidance (Watts, 1999). Whilst respondents appear to be deeply committed to a liberal or sometimes more emancipatory notion of supporting young people, some fear that policy imposes a purpose of social control, and that 'NEET' reduction targets in particular engender this approach. As in the previous study of further education tutors by Colley *et al.* (2007), along with ethical objections, such political objections can create disillusionment and loss of expert practitioners from the profession.

Further theoretical analysis of the findings is still to be done. We are drawing on Smith's (1987, 1999) Marxist feminist standpoint epistemology to connect interpretive methodology with critical theory, and to articulate situated practices, discourse and social structures (Holstein & Gubrium, 1998). This is useful not only because the career guidance profession is highly feminised, but also because Smith's notion of standpoint offers a point of access for going beyond individual accounts to map and critically analyse the regulatory apparatus of the field and its relationship with practice.

However, we can already point to some important implications for our understanding of workplace learning as situated in communities of practice. Changes to the field of youth support, education and training, driven by ideological concerns of social control, and leveraged by infrastructural change, may severely disrupt the membership, knowledge capacity, and learning of a community of practice. When the emotional, ethical and political consequences are resisted only on an individual basis, and when the most experienced 'full participants' are susceptible (like the further education tutors) to extreme disillusionment, or removed involuntarily through restructuring and de-layering, there is a danger that the core of the community of practice may be weakened through exit from the profession, and that new entrants' legitimate peripheral participation will also be insufficiently supported to ensure their transition to full participation. There is a need, then, to consider the ways in which dominant discourses and 'regimes of ruling', and the texts that they engender (in this case, for example, targets to reduce 'NEET' couched in a rhetoric of holistic care) not only serve to co-ordinate the activities of a community of practice (Smith, 2005), but also to shape the inclusion and exclusion of novices and established members, and – potentially – to undermine the learning of individuals and the capacity of the profession as a whole.

Notes