

## **How healthy is your ‘community of practice’?**

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## **'Comment' Article**

### **How Healthy Is Your 'Community of Practice'?**

**Richard Lynch**

#### **Abstract**

This paper explores cultural change and situated approaches to learning as a basis for understanding developments in the daily life of the probation organisation. These are highlighted in the concept of 'communities of practice' that describes learning in the everyday activities of practitioners' work. It is argued that the future can be changed by greater attention to context specific knowledge-in-use through practitioner research.

The probation organisation is undergoing a vast change. On the ground, it can sometimes seem that work with people who have offended is a separate activity squeezed into the time left after administration is satisfied. Such an organisational context does influence practice (Thompson, 2000). This issue will be explored through an examination of learning in the probation organisation. This is considered in relation to 'communities of practice' and organisational culture. Since the organisation is undergoing a 'deep-rooted culture change' (Wallis in National Probation Service, 2001: 5) practitioners, teams and managers are invited to consider their contribution to a healthy organisational environment.

A 'community of practice' is simply the social and physical context for learning. Lave and Wenger (1991) highlighted the concept using a series of anthropological case studies. It is akin to the apprenticeship model of learning where a workplace takes on new workers and trains them in the skills of the trade. When the trainees arrive, they are on the edge of the established team. In time, as their experience and competence grows, they become recognised and accepted as artisans in their own right. From being on the outside looking in, they become an integrated part of the social system of the work group. Their responsibility for work practices increases with experience and time. The approach can be found in medical and legal forms of training based around consultants and partners. The concept is crucial to situated or context based approaches to learning. Rather than concentrating on the learner, as

psychological approaches tend to do, the approach views the learner at work in relation to other participants and technology found in the physical environment (Brown and Duguid, 1991). It takes learning out of the classroom and places it in the authentic day-to-day activities of ordinary people (Brown, Collins and Duguid, 1989). The point of the approach is simply that people learn from what they find in the organisation around them.

### **Culture as the Context for Learning**

Learning can be considered at the level of the organisation, team and individual practitioner but it is the idea that organisations, and the people in them, cannot help but learn that is of interest (DiBella, Nevis and Gould, 1996). Whilst this process can be considered in relation to the individual, or even the 'mind' of the organisation, situated and context-based based approaches to learning will be considered in relation to the concept of a community of practice. These point to the place of organisational culture as being significant to the learning that takes place in organisations (Leo, 2001). Culture is simply 'the way things are done around here'. It provides the immediate environment for influencing the learning of individuals in relation to modelling behaviour and the nature of communities of practice. It is the taken for granted perceptions and assumptions which inform the decisions, communications and activities of groups and individuals.

Deal and Kennedy (1982) have proposed a model of organisational culture that considers the speed of feedback and degree of risk associated with work activities. Feedback on activities can be quick or slow and risk can be low or high. The dimensions of risk and feedback give rise to four classifications of organisational culture: tough guy macho, bet-your-company, work hard/play hard and process culture. The tough guy macho culture arises with quick feedback and high risk organisations, such as sales and the police. The results of their work are apparent very quickly and there is competition for success. A bet-your-company culture is created by slower feedback but high risks. This might apply in the aircraft industry where large projects take many years to establish profitability for the organisation. A work hard/play hard categorisation is associated with quick feedback and low risk and a process culture with slow feedback and low risk. Whilst the four categorisations of risk and feedback have a limited empirical basis and can be challenged as reductionist, they provide an insight into the context for learning or culture of the probation organisation.

The 1970s could be characterised as period of slow feedback and low risk. There was little external pressure on probation to perform and the client group was, compared to today, lower risk. Contemporary probation lives in a period of rapid feedback on its work. Organisational targets are set, enforcement audits are carried out and money is withheld from under performing areas. Staff are monitored, their individual performance appraised against organisational targets and their compliance with national standards scrutinised during management

reviews especially when serious incidents by offenders take place. There are new tougher law enforcement practices so that community sentences become a credible punishment (HM Government, 2002). According to Deal and Kennedy (1982) this would herald a move towards a tough guy, macho culture. They suggest that such a culture is characterised by conflict and swift decision-making. Political manoeuvrings are necessary to gain promotion and short-term decisions dominate as immediate success is valued.

The other possibility to describe the culture of probation is found in the bet-your-company categorisation. The target of a 5% reduction in reconviction by 2004 using accredited programmes might indicate this type. This amounts to a large scale criminological experiment (Merrington and Stanley, 2000). What would happen to probation if this target were not met? Would the extra money given by the Treasury have to be returned? Would accredited programmes be abandoned? Such uncertainty characterises the future of the organisation in this cultural type. Experts are brought in to offer their opinions upon every crucial stage of the project. In probation there is a Correctional Services Accreditation Panel to approve programmes and Multi-Agency Public Protection Panels (MAPPs) to guide the management of the most violent and dangerous offenders. In such a culture staff are assessed for their technical skills in promoting the core rationality of effective practice. Offenders are targeted for interventions using the evidence and expertise of technical guidance manuals. Those who do not succeed on such programmes are deemed unsuitable for the process of 're-

moralisation' that is on offer and therefore further excluded from society to protect the public by periods of imprisonment (Kemshall, 2002).

### **The Implications for Learning**

If the macho tough guy cultural category applies to probation there will be implications for the learning environment. A culture that promotes punishment as a purpose, enforcement as an administrative practice and competition between areas may be modelling the desired attributes of staff behaviour. These are not necessarily effective ones for the work of probation (Smith, 2001). Staff may become judged by the risks that they can take managing large caseloads according to minimum standards and delivering programmes without major incident. Reflection, discussion and negotiation become redundant in the face of the demands of the managerially time-bound and stressful workplace (Nellis, 2002). The changes in learning and communication found in the culture reflect a new context for practice.

Similarly, in a bet your company culture, staff may become deferential in their respect for experts as their own knowledge and skills become supportive of the 'larger project' rather than inherently valuable. If fixed theoretical approaches and technical systems come to dominate the organisation - such as What Works and OASys - claims to expertise become based on a knowledge that is regarded as generally applicable. This is the domain of 'technical rationality' and claims for

generalisable scientific and positivist knowledge. Schon (1983) and Robinson (2001) respectively relate the problems of such knowledge in the field of professional development and for the probation service in particular. In the realm of human services, more context specific knowledge-in-action is needed. Workers develop knowledge-in-use from reflection in and on their actions. This knowledge is by definition context dependent. It is here that 'professionals' become experts in the hidden, difficult to measure and intangible contributors to risk and rehabilitation. Such an approach does not suggest that the progress towards evidence based practice and a consistent assessment procedure is wrong. Rather it points to the importance of these as being used by capable practitioners who understand their use in the difficult to measure arena of problematic human behaviour.

What Works promotes an enquiring 'scientific practitioner' approach to evaluating practice (McGuire, 2000) and OASys (Home Office, 2002) recognises the system as an aid to judgement not a replacement for the process of assessment itself. The concern in probation is perhaps that the locus of knowledge is becoming more organisationally focused rather than practitioner generated. Whilst small-scale research has done little to build a coherent knowledge base in the past (Hedderman, 1998), recent trends towards large-scale government sponsored projects have removed the ownership of theory and knowledge from grass roots practitioners. What Works may have started as a practitioner inspired movement in the early 1990s (Vanstone, 2000) but it has now become the established



orthodoxy (Gorman, 2001). Staff are unlikely to perform well if they are not allowed the room to participate and innovate in creatively designed jobs (Ichniowski, Kochan and Olson, 1996). They are also not likely to use the tools and techniques arising from research in which they have had no stake.

## **The Changing Context of Probation**

It is clear that at the organisational level significant changes have been taking place in the context for learning of the probation service. 'Evidence-based' practice and modernisation have become vital to delivering the 'third way' of a new balance between individual rights, state provision and community responsibilities (Kemshall, 2002). For probation these are manifest in What Works and the delivery of accredited programmes (Robinson, 2001). Tendencies towards centralisation are already becoming apparent (Wargent, 2002). A more punitive sentencing climate reflects the fear of and prevalence of high crime rates in late modernity (Garland, 2000). The awareness of crime and its part in contemporary politics have both increased.

The resulting developments in the probation organisation provide a new context for organisational, team and individual learning. Several probation areas have been subject to 'service design' initiatives. The composition and purpose of teams has changed and new organisational relationships established. Career paths and traditional roles have changed as responsibilities and patterns of

working have developed. The 'community of practice' for many staff has changed as administrative, offender-focused and risk management roles have fragmented and come together in newly defined roles. For individual staff, the changes have been immense. From a social work orientation there has been a move towards punishment in the community. The relationship with the court has moved from being an 'officer' to a functionary of an agency which has its own service level agreement to provide specified pieces of work. Individual practice therefore comes to be mediated in the larger policy context through the organisational context of the probation area and team.

The internal and external contexts for probation noted in this article suggest a vast cultural change is underway. Practitioners may be forgiven for considering their traditional skills to be redundant (Gast and Taylor, 1998). The place of practice seems less important than the manuals and procedures that now govern it. Where then does the learning take place for practitioners, teams and indeed the organisation in the new organisational culture? Taking the situated and context related approaches described earlier, it is going on all of the time. The offices, work places and rooms where staff meet, talk and discuss their work provide the new curriculum for learning. This can be dominated by managerially driven imperatives to implement systems or the substance of work with offenders. What is working, what is effective on the ground? Practitioners can share their knowledge and insights and develop good practice with each other. A

new organisational culture can be created in the practices and communications established by staff themselves.

It is perhaps in the framework of the 'community of practice' that the most significant insight into learning takes place. The model drawn by Lave and Wenger (1991) shows how important new staff are to the future of the group. With many new staff arriving in the organisation, the greatest opportunities for developing learning in the organisation lay with them. My own experience, as a probation officer and teacher, suggests that many trainee probation officers, at least, share the humanitarian concerns that are found with established staff. They are likely to learn from what they see, hear and feel from those around and to form their identities accordingly (Wenger, 1998). Research with a small sample of trainees suggests that colleagues are one of the most significant factors in trainees' learning (Lynch, 2002).

### **A New Direction?**

Such an approach to learning suggests a 'bottom -up' direction beloved by innovative and inspiring management texts. Staff may, however, feel disempowered by high workloads and the very cultural attributes highlighted in this article. A tool that can be used for encouraging organisational change is found in the European Excellence Model (EFQM, 1999). The focus is on 'performance' and on the systems and processes which enable 'excellence'.

Despite the language of managerialism there is an opportunity to engage in a reflective and critical examination of the context for learning in the organisation. The stated context for the European Excellence Model is a 'culture of innovation and learning'. New ways of doing business that contribute to the success of the enterprise are welcomed in excellent organisations. In relation to the locus of knowledge in the organisation, it is practitioner research that will provide insights into how the larger probation project is progressing on the ground.

Practitioners are in the best possible position to provide empirically grounded insights into What Works in practice to show how it can be changed or improved. Indeed it is organisational and implementation issues which are likely to be increasingly important (Bernfeld, Farrington and Leschied 2001). Case evaluations (Gorman, 2001) and qualitative studies can provide a context specific understanding of effective practice. The official large-scale projects remain crucial for quantitative data and general qualitative findings. They provide evidence for the efficacy of the current probation project. As for tomorrow's project, this may again be driven by the passion and enthusiasm of practitioners enquiring about 'what else works for who, in what circumstances and when'. This last issue is perhaps crucial, as more is understood about desistance from offending (Rex, 1999) and the importance of the social context to reducing offending (Farrall, 2002). The targeting of suitable offenders who are prepared and motivated for intensive programme interventions may benefit from practitioner research. The nature of support needed to maintain motivation and

attendance could benefit from practitioner wisdom. The challenge of balancing programme integrity with the real world of offenders' lives could create new developments in practitioner-led interventions that go beyond mechanistic enforcement action.

## **Conclusion**

The context for learning in organisations is important to the learning that takes place. Paying attention to the cultural aspects of communication and everyday practices brings a greater depth of understanding to the working experience. The influence of the wider organisational context is significant but the communities of practice found in every office and team have an impact too. They help create the fabric of experience that filters perceptions and understandings and moves the everyday strategies of groups of probation practitioners. The argument of this paper calls for practitioners to seize hold of this learning environment by recognising their impact upon each other and new staff in the organisation. Whilst the organisational territory may often seem incontestable, a dialogue on effective practice informed by research that is grounded in an understanding of the responses and strengths of offenders may yet prove powerful.

2571 words

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