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## Research Article

# Communities of practice and ‘student voice’: engaging with student representatives at the faculty level

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## Abstract

Student engagement in institutional governance and curriculum development is an important and valued aspect of higher education (HE). In the UK, changes to funding and quality assurance arrangements have led to concerns that a consumerist model is developing, with implied changes to the relationship between students and universities. The National Union of Students has responded by calling for reframing these relationships as communities of practice (Streeting and Wise 2009) and more recently as a clearly defined partnership (Wenstone 2012). This article explores the applicability of a theoretical model (communities of practice, Wenger 2001) to the realities of practice relating to one aspect of student governance, through a project that revitalised the way one university faculty worked with student representatives (O’Hara and Flint 2010). Using theory as a critical lens, to explore how this project promoted the development of a community of practice, provided valuable insights and recommendations for developing the engagement of students with institutional governance. Our analysis also highlighted the complexity of applying this framework in practice and recommends integration with complementary scholarship around student voice and partnerships.

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## Introduction

The notion of involving students in higher education institution (HEI) governance is widespread, although models of involvement vary in practice. Within the UK, the most ubiquitous model is the student representative system. A review of student engagement by Little *et al.* (2009) indicated that a range of formal and informal models of working with representatives are in use across institutions. Almost all institutions had representation through the students' union on institutional level committees, three quarters had representation at faculty/school level, and two thirds had representation at the programme-level. Just over half of institutions surveyed also held staff-student liaison meetings as part of their formal student engagement processes. In addition, student representatives are involved in external reviews of institutional quality and standards through the Quality Assurance Agency's institutional audit process (QAA 2009). This is not an agenda limited to Higher Education, the schools sector in many countries has a long history of commitment to encouraging student participation and voice in educational governance (Cook-Sather 2002; Ruddock and Fielding 2006; McFarland and Starmanns 2009).

Regardless of model, there are clear potential benefits of involving students in this way. Lizzio and Wilson (2009) categorise these benefits as functional (relating to the institution), developmental (relating to individual students) and social (relating to society). At the functional level, student representative systems play an essential role in accessing and articulating the concerns of the wider student population and contributing to the development of institutional policy and practice. Students are in a unique position; having an overview and experience of the complete course curriculum 'as-practiced' as opposed to 'as-planned' (Visser *et al.* 1998). Developmentally, students can potentially benefit from taking on formal representative roles through the development of transferable skills (Fielding 2001) and insight into how large organisations like universities are organised and managed (Visser *et al.* 1998). Finally, the benefits to society relate to the role these systems play in encouraging democratic discourse and active citizenship amongst students (Lizzio and Wilson 2009).

Whilst the involvement of students in institutional governance is laudable, the effectiveness of current models is unclear and limited research on the impact of this

work has been published. The authors agree with Fielding (2004) that in order to ensure the sustainability and efficacy of 'student voice' and student involvement work, a scholarly approach to practice is required. 'Student voice' should be a valid field of intellectual enquiry as well as a range of valued practices. Without this critical and scholarly perspective it is at risk of being perceived (and practiced) as a managerialist fad, leading to tokenism and surface compliance, without due consideration of whether the approaches to student voice used are fit for purpose (Ruddock and Fielding 2009). This article aims to contribute to this emerging scholarship.

The staff-student committee model, used in the majority of HEIs in the UK (Little *et al.* 2009), emerged in the late 1960s (Bergan 2003). Since which time there has been considerable change in the context, structure and organisation of HE. Furthermore, these mechanisms (largely designed by educators not students) may not be perceived as effective by all parties (Cook-Sather 2002). Given that Little *et al.*'s (2009, 56) review found that institutional and students' union staff in the UK perceived mechanisms functioning better at the 'institutional and operational (school/department/programme) level than at the intermediate (faculty) level', we believed there was considerable scope to reflect on and critique our own faculty level practice.

Within the UK HE sector the introduction and rise of tuition fees, and the increasing emphasis on student satisfaction as a measure of quality, has led to widespread concerns over the commoditisation of HE and a view of students as consumers. Whilst this concern is of relevance to HE generally, there are specific implications for student governance. The notion of students as consumers may shape the relationship between student representatives and their institutions. In response to these issues Streeting and Wise (2009) have proposed a purposeful shift to create the conditions within HE for communities of practice (CoP) amongst students, and between staff and students, to emerge. Many of their recommendations relate to the subject-based or academic aspects of the student experience, but they also highlight the role students could play in 'regular, open discussions and debates about institutional policy and strategy' (ibid. 4).

This article follows Streeting and Wise's (2009) lead and aims to explore how far the theoretical model of a community of practice (Wenger 2001), can be applied to a

sub-section of the student body – student representatives – to provide richer understandings of the relationship between students and their institution (e.g. Lea 2005). The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to engage in a critical dialogue between practice and theory. Our focus is a project both authors were involved in which aimed to build a sense of community amongst student representatives and staff at the intermediate (faculty) level within a new (post-1992) UK university. A detailed description of the project and its evaluation is published elsewhere (O'Hara and Flint 2010), therefore this article will provide a brief overview of the work and explore in further detail those aspects which have direct relevance to the community of practice model.

### **Overview of the project**

The project was based in the Faculty of Development and Society (D&S) at Sheffield Hallam University. At the start of the project there were roughly 1000 course representatives across the University, of whom almost 400 were based in D&S. Each Faculty also recruited a small number of students to sit on cross-Faculty committees (e.g. Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee, Quality Enhancement Committee). The Students' Union (SU) offered training during induction to all student representatives. However, evidence from attendance registers, and anecdotes from staff, suggested that once recruited many student representatives were not as engaged in the role as the University expected them to be, both in formal meetings and less formal day-to-day interactions with peers and staff.

The impetus for our project was a perceived lack of engagement of student representatives, and our hypothesis that the reason for this lay with the mechanisms and processes used by the University rather than implied lack of commitment or willingness on the part of the students. As one course leader remarked during a discussion on the topic, 'Why would they [students] attend? It's just not sexy'. The project team felt that to allow this situation to continue would be unethical, creating barriers to student learning, and was unhelpful to the institution; as it increased the likelihood that opportunities to improve and build on good practice to ensure an excellent student experience would be missed. The mechanisms for student involvement and student voice activities needed to be both authentic and effective.

The main aim of the project was to create a context in which student representatives and staff could work together, toward the shared aim of facilitating a high quality student experience. The project sought to do this by increasing student engagement with the Faculty's representative feedback mechanisms and develop new approaches to capturing the student voice. The approach centred on empowerment, encouraging students to acquire greater influence both over agendas and the development of improved ways of working, to find a way to preserve and strengthen the institution's ability to engage in a constructive dialogue with students.

Three strands were developed based on the need to adhere to certain University requirements and consideration of good practice in other parts of the education sector nationally.

The first strand took its inspiration from the schools sector (e.g. Rudd *et al.* 2006) to establish a *Faculty Student Council*, in partnership with the Students' Union (SU), which comprised all Faculty Student Representatives. Student Council members were allocated staff mentors to help them prepare for meetings and offer support and encouragement in committees to ensure their voice being considered. The Council would meet four times per and notes from Council meetings were reported to the Faculty's Programme Leaders Committee and Heads of Department Management group.

The second strand of the project centred on the *Faculty Forum*. This was a mandatory bi-annual Forum which all student representatives were invited to attend in order to raise problems and concerns. With SU agreement, the format and ethos of the fora in D&S were radically altered: moving from the previous dialectical, sometimes adversarial, approach to a workshop format aimed at producing practical suggestions and recommendations. Students were framed as co-constructors and numbers of staff at these fora were managed to ensure that students always outnumbered staff by a considerable margin to further reduce any sense that they could not speak frankly.

There is a tension here around the level at which student representatives are engaged. NUS research (2011) on the student experience indicates that the majority students wish to be involved in quality enhancement at the course level. From an institutional perspective, whilst the course is acknowledged as the primary focus for

students, there are still issues and priorities at the faculty and institutional level in which student representative engagement is invaluable. However, Little *et al.* (2009) have indicated that current mechanisms work least well at the intermediate (faculty) level, highlighting an area where practice may be improved. This creates a situation where the faculty is trying to engage student representatives at the level they are least likely or willing to. This could be seen as flying in the face of conventional wisdom. However, we felt that there are considerable benefits for the institution, staff and students in building a greater sense of community and engagement at this level.

The third strand involved an annual *student representative away day*, which was re-invented as an exciting opportunity for staff and students to work together, and provide opportunities for representatives to develop key employability skills. The emphasis and ethos of the days were creativity, activity and excitement, and co-produced resources and materials.

The evaluation of the impact of the project is detailed elsewhere (O-Hara and Flint, 2010) and included synthesis of: student attendance at interventions; a questionnaire administered to student representatives at the start and close of the project (drawing on Wilson-Grau and Nunez, 2007); semi-structured interviews with student council members and focus group with the project team; and, direct comments from students who participated in interventions.

The evaluation indicated that the project achieved the objective of increasing student representative participation in faculty governance, and provided greater opportunities for student voice to be heard, but we were cognisant that we had not completely addressed the problem.

## **Communities of Practice**

It is not possible, within the scope of this article, to give a comprehensive overview of the theory and research underpinning Wenger's (2001; 2009) conceptual framework of communities of practice (CoP). However, it is pertinent to revisit how this framework may be employed to inform a critique of the project. Put simply, the term CoP refers to 'a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise' (Wenger 2001, 45). This is rooted in a social theory of learning which recognises that

learning 'changes who we are by changing our ability to participate, to belong, to negotiate meaning' (Ibid. 226). Framed this way, learning is seen as a process of social participation with multiple elements: meaning (learning as experience); practice (learning as doing); community (learning as belonging); and, identity (learning as becoming).

As Wenger points out, the framework is not intended as a recipe for designing CoP, they exist whether they are designed or not. However, it can be employed as a thinking tool or lens through which to examine interactions, to explore what to attend to and develop strategies for change. Conditions can be created which may enable or nurture the development and maintenance of CoP, and it is this that forms the basis for our critique. The relationship between student representatives and their university is an interesting case for application of this theoretical lens as it sits between the two applications described by Wenger (2001): it is both an educational and organisational relationship.

The notion of CoP had informed the early thinking of the project team, but had not been explicitly used when designing the project activities. Following Wenger (2001, 239) we did not use this as a classification system but 'rather to provide a framework to ask how a specific design... serves the different requirements of the learning architecture'. As a framework for critiquing our project this enabled us to take a step back and see the community from another angle, critiquing our role in developing the community and the processes and mechanisms used, exploring whether these design requirements were met and what provocative insights and potential foci for further work are generated. We focused on the three components, and sub-components, of Wenger's Learning Architecture:

- Engagement: mutuality, competence and continuity
- Imagination: orientation, reflection and exploration
- Alignment: convergence, co-ordination and jurisdiction (Wenger 2001).

Although student representatives and the staff they work with could be seen as a distinct community it is not recognised as a formal structural group by the institution, therefore has more in common with a community of practice (CoP). One of the fundamental principles of the conceptual model of CoP is that members of the



community have a shared purpose. Student representatives and staff in universities are obviously engaged in the same pursuit of higher education, but have different roles and foci within that pursuit. In volunteering to represent their peers, student representatives aim to advocate on their behalf in order to improve their experiences and develop their own skills. In working with student representatives staff are looking for insights from students on the quality of their experiences, how those can be maintained, and if appropriate improved. Therefore, whilst they may have different perspectives on their aims, members of the community have a shared aim of quality enhancement: facilitating a high quality university experience for students.

## **Discussion**

### ***Identified strengths***

Perhaps the area of greatest strength suggested through the analysis related to 'engagement'. Wenger (2001) describes engagement as requiring great social energy and creativity. Staff involved in the project went to great lengths to encourage the participation of student representatives and to demonstrate a commitment to collaborative working. Communications were proactive and personalised follow-up with those that could not participate aimed to identify any unanticipated barriers. A creative approach was taken to the design and publicity of interventions, for example, a group of staff and students created an animated video invitation to the Faculty Forum.

*Mutuality* was designed into the format of interventions, moving away from a committee model to highly interactive workshops: arranged at times convenient for students and built these into online timetables where possible. Asynchronous involvement was facilitated through the virtual learning environment (Blackboard), personalised e-mail contact and the exploration of new technologies. The dedication of professional services colleagues was an essential and incredibly powerful means of securing student engagement early in the project. In interviews, members of the student council described the importance of the actions of staff ('living what they say') in creating an atmosphere where they felt questions were welcomed and student contributions were valued and listened to. From the staff perspective this was felt to have 'persuaded the students we are serious about this'.

Staff and students engaged in a range of creative joint tasks throughout the project. For example, a writing workshop facilitated by a poet to produce a series of provocative riddles and poems about the student experience, which were then displayed on posters and postcards around the campus. Much of the feedback from fora and away days highlighted the value of the process of undertaking joint tasks in building a sense of community and creating space for dialogue amongst community members: 'Useful to have groupwork and discussions as it allows us the opportunity to hear the views and ideas of others'.

The student council played a significant role in setting the agenda both for their own meetings and, with staff and the Students' Union, shaped the programme and schedule of course representative activities through the Faculty Fora. Again, the opportunity for dialogue was important, expressed most clearly in the value placed on the council's ability to invite senior faculty staff to their meetings.

The project team, together with colleagues across the faculty and the students' union, provided training and support to ensure student representatives had the *competence* needed for their role and had opportunities to apply their skills and knowledge in practice. Student council members in particular highlighted the role of mentoring in supporting them to actively participate in the committee they sat on. The interviewees valued the training for their role being 'on the job', reflecting the importance of skills having direct relevance to their practice within the community. The formal training was appreciated as it equipped them to carry out their role (for example, workshop activities developing advocacy and feedback skills) and provided a valued insight into the 'behind the scenes' working of the University: giving them a richer understanding of staff roles and organisational structures and practice. Unsurprisingly, many students also valued the transferable nature of skills they had acquired through training and practice for future employability. Outside of the formal opportunities for learning, which were largely focused at student members of the community, there were also opportunities for more informal, collaborative learning between staff and students, for example, exploring the use of new technologies for asynchronous communication.

Other strengths were around 'imagination'; with many project activities creating time and space for *reflection* and *exploration*. For example, the first Faculty Forum used feedback from student experience surveys as a focus for structured and collective

reflection and problem solving. Whilst members of the student council did not 'research' solutions to issues they had raised, they made considered suggestions which resulted in actions and were given scope to explore these. For example, the Head of Learning and Information Services was invited to the Student Council to discuss issues around behaviour in the Learning Centre, which resulted in action around building behavioural expectations into induction and orientation activities.

### ***Areas for more attention***

A major issue for any institution working with student representation and student involvement is *continuity*; principally due to the time-bound nature of students' engagement with their University. There are no real 'old-timers' amongst the student representatives as there are amongst staff members: the longest a student representative could theoretically be actively involved is three years for undergraduates and possibly one or two years longer if they continue on to postgraduate study. This clearly has consequences given the time it takes for individuals to develop a sense of community membership. In interviews at the end of the academic year, student council members described their transition from being a 'rabbit in the headlights' to only just starting to understand their role. As such, many wanted to continue as a representative to 'have a good crack at it' the following year. One way to address this issue would be to explore whether more continuity could be designed in through the physical memory of the community. At present, documentation of issues and actions is only provided to current student representatives, archiving these and making them available to new and future community members would help to establish what the practice of the community comprises. Opportunities for new members to access the participative memory of the community are largely through informal conversations with more experienced student representatives, and formal mentoring with staff. Extending this to include formal mentoring with experienced student representatives would provide a focus for the sharing of their experiences and learning. Lave and Wenger (2007) suggest that the increasing participation of 'newcomers' can have implications for their more experienced near peers, who may be facing the end of their involvement with the community. This does not hold the same tensions for our community, as student representative roles are necessarily time bound, but it does identify an area where additional attention may be focused. Capturing the learning of outgoing student

representatives would provide them with a satisfactory exit experience and opportunities to reflect on how they can use their experience in future settings, and inform the way in which the institution facilitates the development of the community for new members.

Staff and students are members of multiple institutional communities and legitimate peripheral participation may be a useful lens to explore the tensions and benefits that the significant overlap between existing institutional identities and communities the student representative and staff community creates. Lave and Wenger (2007) describe legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) as the process through which newcomers become a part of a community: through both socio-cultural practices and acquisition of transferable and content knowledge. This frames learning not as an abstraction but as situated and a core dimension of engaging in social processes. Neophyte student representatives go through a process of LPP with two overlapping communities. One is the community of the institution, or in their case, their faculty/department: learning about institutional processes, the culture of the institution and appropriate practices and behaviour. In this community participation may always be to some extent peripheral when compared with the participation of members of university staff. The second is the student representative community. In fostering participation within this community it is the university that has a more peripheral role - the student representative community is part of the fabric of the institution, but the roots of this community are in the Students' Union. Our institution is fortunate in that there is a strong mutual relationship with the Students' Union and participation in these overlapping communities is welcomed and encouraged. The activities undertaken by student representatives as part of the university community may be framed as peripheral, when compared with staff, but they do make a positive contribution to that community and are therefore both valued and authentic.

Within the faculty student representative and staff community there may be differences in the terms of engagement of staff and student members, which could create barriers to full participation. The temporary nature of student representative participation has already been highlighted but there were additional differences. For example, staff were community members in paid work-time, whereas for students it was a voluntary role in addition to study and other commitments. The impact this barrier has

may vary according to individual circumstances. For example, the project team noted that particular groups of students (e.g. part-time) were not well represented within the diversity of student representatives; a large proportion of the Faculty's part-time students were also 'commuter' students and as such may have had limited additional time to take-on student representative roles (Kuh *et al.* 2001; HEFCE 2009).

There were also differences around accountability. One of the aims of the project was to increase engagement with 'student voice' activities and opportunities. The concept of 'voice' is premised on redressing the fact that differential power in institutions means that students are not necessarily empowered to change all aspects of their personal learning project. By introducing additional opportunities, and incentives to engage, institutions are attempting to empower students to have a greater influence. In practice, this has resulted in very little formal accountability on the part of student representatives. Whilst behavioural expectations of student representatives can be encouraged, the voluntary nature of the role means that there are few consequences for disengagement/non-participation. Similarly, student representatives have limited decision-making power within the community. Staff go to great lengths to involve students as active participants in the work of the community, and schedule and format meetings and training in response to student input, but the final decision on most matters rests with staff. This was implied in some of the comments from interviews with student council members: stressing the importance of having a senior staff member involved in the council meetings as otherwise they felt they would have no 'weight' to influence decisions being made.

This raises the question of whether full participation of student representatives in this community is possible in the current culture. A recurring word in discourse about working with students is 'partnership'. Wenstone (2012) argues for the need to unpick what we mean by this term and how appropriate it is for describing current relationships. Scholarship on partnerships suggests successful partnerships occur where there is a jointly recognised need for joint working, where decision-making processes and agenda setting are shared between partners (Wildridge *et al.* 2004). At present, the nature of student representative engagement in this community is unlikely to result in real partnership; they have less perceived ownership, often peripheral membership, and less stake in the long-term development of the community. Mutuality may be more a

useful frame for this relationship, emphasising principles of fairness as opposed to equity. Lave and Wenger (2007) describe the motivation to shift from LPP to full participation as linked to newcomers' perception of the use and value of participation. However, in the case of the student representative and staff community there are structural and institutional factors which may restrict equity in terms of engagement. Do student representatives want full participation or see it as potentially adding to the multiple demands on their time?

### ***Lessons from the school sector: authenticity, power relations and inclusion***

Our analysis indicates that, whilst useful as a lens to explore the nature of the relationship between student representatives and the staff they work closely with, there are complexities in applying a theoretical 'communities of practice' framework to this relationship. For the present at least we have little prospect of changing some aspects of this relationship, particularly around accountability, length of membership, and decision-making powers. The challenge is how to enhance the sense of community between staff and students within these constraints. Having taken our inspiration for the Student Council from the school's sector, we felt this was a fertile ground to draw inspiration from in improving the conditions for student involvement and voice. Ruddock and Fielding (2006) describe the 'big issues' for student voice in schools as power relations, authenticity and inclusion: we argue that these issues are as important in HE.

From the student perspective, authenticity rests on three things: whether they have been involved in determining the focus of consultation; whether the interest of adults in what they have to say is real or contrived; and whether there is discussion of their suggestions and active follow-through (Ruddock and Fielding 2006, 226).

The Student Council and Faculty Forum meetings strove to meet the criteria for authenticity by involving students in determining the topics and agenda for discussion and action, and by demonstrating how their comments have been acted on. For example, staff made an explicit commitment to summarise actions from Faculty Fora within a week of each forum meeting and provide subsequent progress updates. The proactive and supportive approach taken by staff co-ordinating the work with student

representatives was appreciated by students who said they felt their contributions were valued.

Given the voluntary nature of the student representative role, inclusivity remains a challenge. One member of the project team mused that in the very act of raising their hand to be a representative, students became un-representative as very few of their peers volunteered for the role. Ruddock and Fielding (2006) ask whether it may be the 'best-served' by the current system that put themselves forward, e.g. those students who are doing well and are already engaged. This raises challenges for accessing the voice of the 'silent majority' and drawing them into the community of the institution. Through the Faculty Fora student representatives have begun sharing their ideas and approaches to accessing the wider voice of their constituent students and this is a continuing focus of the community.

The power relations between staff and student representative are complex. Putting aside the power related aspects of the educational experience (that staff are often the assessors and designers of curriculum content) structurally at least, staff have more power when working with student representatives. Although, professional services staff went to great lengths to schedule face-to-face activities at times convenient to students, and students were involved in determining the meeting and event agendas, in most cases staff had the final say and used institutionally 'owned' communication channels and resources. However, there was a distinction here between perceived agency in the development of the community and *how* staff and students worked together, and perceived agency in being able to act on issues and have an impact on the wider university community. In our evaluation the 'after' questionnaire indicated 85% of students felt able to influence the development of the student representative community, but only 60% felt they could make a difference to the student experience in the Faculty. This distinction in ownership and power is not designed-in and may reflect assumptions held by members of the community about one another's roles. For example, the project team were happy for the Student Council to decide when their meetings would be, book rooms, and invite senior staff they wanted to attend. However, in reality, students felt the administrative arrangements were staff responsibilities and in some cases were unsure of whom to invite to discuss certain issues, and so sought suggestions from staff. This only one perception of what 'power' and agency in this context might mean, it is

possible that non-participation and non-attendance at formal meetings is one way in which students have exerted their agency in the past: by 'voting with their feet'.

Fielding (2004) argues that, in order to move the student voice on from this impasse, radical transformation is needed: the first step being the deconstruction of the presumptions of the present. In particular, he encourages reflection on the values and beliefs around student voice and how far these, and existing structures and processes, are reified in our approaches. In our project, conscious efforts were made to successfully challenge the status quo in terms of the format of faculty fora and establishing an independent student council. However, in reflecting on the support provided for members of this community we find that the majority was provided by experienced staff targeted only at student representatives and largely focused on providing those representatives with the insight and skills to function within existing structures and processes. An exception to this is the collaboration of staff and the Student Council to produce written guidance for staff on such things as academic conventions and inclusive practice. This work is still evolving and we are happy with the progress made, but this indicates the difficulties in being truly transformative.

An issue here may be that our attempts at transformation were focused at only one piece of the picture. Visser *et al.* (1998) argue that student involvement in institutional governance is the next logical step in having truly student-centred approach to learning, involving students in the evaluation, modification and innovation within the curriculum. Therefore, real student engagement in these opportunities may be more authentic where there is alignment with student centred approaches to learning and teaching. We would extend this to suggest that engagement will be more authentic where a student centred approach is taken to the *way* students are involved in student governance. Comments from our student council members indicated that the Faculty Committees they sat on often operated on a different format and premise than the Faculty Forum and Student Council, which created dissonance and barriers to student engagement. One of the challenges ahead is to extend this work to the numerous Faculty and Course Committees on which student representatives play a key role.

Following this deconstruction of presumptions, Fielding (2004) recommends a greater appreciation of the necessity of dialogue. Following Bohm (1996), we understand dialogue as distinctive from discussion in that it is concerned with collective



sense making as a process of surfacing assumptions, opinions and understandings in a non-defensive way:

'The point is that dialogue has to go into all the pressures that are behind our assumptions. It goes into the process of thought behind the assumptions, not just the assumptions themselves.' (Bohm 1996, 9).

This is also distinct to 'listening' to student voice, and accepting this as 'unproblematically insightful and liberating', it is about collaboration (Fielding 2004). The Faculty Forum, Student Council and asynchronous communication activities all aimed to provide space for more open and creative dialogue between staff and student representatives. Bearing in mind the potential problems in speaking for or on behalf of others (ibid.), a focus of this dialogue has been to 'speak with' student representatives in collaborative work, documents and materials. Returning to the CoP literature, engagement stems from involving participants in what matters (Wenger 2001), and we continue to explore opportunities to 'share the stage' with student representatives on issues that matter most to them.

## **Conclusions**

The aim of this article was to explore the nature of the relationship between student representatives and staff in one Faculty of a UK university through the theoretical lens of communities of practice. Our analysis indicates that some aspects of the CoP framework were particularly useful, specifically through exploring the dimension of engagement, gaining greater insight into the nature of peripheral participation, and understanding the subtleties of the impact that organisational and structural boundaries have on the nature of the relationship. However, some features of CoPs were more difficult to reconcile with our experience of the student representative and staff relationship. These focused specifically around the different terms of engagement of staff and students (with distinctions between paid vs. volunteer status, permanent vs. temporary membership, and roles in the administration of the community). The analysis has raised a number of challenging issues for those working with student representatives, around how we might best frame that relationship. It may be that the power relationship between institutional staff member and student representative is unavoidable. For example, the community of practice and activities reported here were largely conducted within the language, processes and locus of the institutional

community. To be content with the legitimate peripheral participation of student representatives in the institutional community may well create a qualitatively different kind of community of practice. We do not propose easy solutions to these issues, but highlight the usefulness of scholarly work from the schools context in helping to develop fairer, authentic and more inclusive approaches, and encourage others to engage with this scholarship. In closing, we are heartened by research by Brown and Dugoid (1991, 41) which suggests that 'through their constant adapting to changing membership and changing circumstances, evolving communities-of-practice are significant sites of innovating'. As a constantly evolving community, we are optimistic for the future innovative and collaborative work of our student representatives and staff.

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