Situated learning: The experience of international postgraduate students

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This presentation

- Postgraduate learning in a UK university
  - One-year masters
  - Doctoral
- The experience international students
- Situated learning in a community of practice
  - Biography and agency
  - Shared repertoire
  - Mutuality and jointness
- Language and assessment
Pedagogy – institutional offer

- Curriculum
- Community of Practice as
  - Activity
  - Knowledge
  - People

Wenger et al 2002
Situated Learning – Wenger 1998
Two projects

- **SAIL**
  - Socialisation and Identity in Learning - Informal curriculum, learning in community

- **SILP**
  - Student identity learning and progression – IELTS, and learner identity
...to investigate learning-in-practice in situations that do not draw us in unreflective ways into the school milieu, and to look for ‘educational’ occasions whose structure is not obscured quite so profoundly as those founded on didactic structuring.

L&W 1991:61-2
SAIL

- Observation in apprenticeship learning
- Central in apprentices’ learning – midwives and tailors, but not butchers – disconnect between the knowledge in action and abstract, decontextualised knowledge. Questions of validity of the competence focused on in assessment for certification

L&W 1991
SAIL – Experience of learning

**Informal learning**
- Involvement in learning groups with classmates
- Participation in virtual learning environments
- Attending optional seminars and workshops
- Discussions with tutors and other members of the academic community

**Formal learning**
- Lectures and seminars
- Tutorials
- Reading
- Writing assignments
### SAIL – Experience of learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>U/G exit profile</th>
<th>Lang Profile (IELTS or other)</th>
<th>Progression (6 taught modules+diss) (Three pass levels – A, B, C)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chi</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>90.5</td>
<td>7 7 7.5 7 7</td>
<td>A A A B A A A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ilan</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>87.11</td>
<td>7.5 8.5 7.5 7 7</td>
<td>A A A A A A A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kai</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3.20/4.0</td>
<td>TOEFL 603; TWE 5</td>
<td>C B B C C C B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lin</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>80 (top 15%)</td>
<td>6.5 6.5 6.5 6 7</td>
<td>C C C (C) C C B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ping</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2.54 (cl 2.2)</td>
<td>7.5 7 7.5 8 7</td>
<td>B C B B - C -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sen</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3.46 (MA)</td>
<td>TOEFL 253 TWE 4.5</td>
<td>B B B C C B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tian</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>GA:66.31 (fair)</td>
<td>6.5 6 6 6 7</td>
<td>C C C C (C) C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary of narratives

**Chi**
- A sense of self characterised by achievement
- A learner-teacher view characterised by potential to be developed
- Community membership as supportive and opportunity for learning
- Participation

**Lin**
- A sense of self characterised by struggle(s)
- A learner-teacher view characterised by obstacles to be overcome
- Community membership as potentially threatening, and contested
- Marginalisation
SAIL – The role of biography

- From childhood on, I have dreamt to be an excellent English teacher. Every time when I watched Outlook English Speech Contest in CCTN in China, a burst of excitement and admiration would come in mind.

  (Lin - Orientation assignment Month 1)
SAIL – The role of biography

- My parents were patient listeners and brilliant interlocutors, so it was always safe to use the language [L1].

  (Chi - Orientation assignment Month 1)
CoP – Identity and agency

• … dependence on the workplace to achieve their goals […] was […] shaped by the individuals’ desire to be themselves. They were able to negotiate and achieve their goals through their work. […] the pressure of the workplace and the agency of the individuals came together…

Billet (2007:64)
CoP and Learning

• Mutual Engagement

• Joint Enterprise

• Shared Repertoire
Shared Repertoire

- Stories
- Styles
- Artefacts
- Tools
- Actions
- Historical events
- Discourses
- Concepts
Shared repertoire – the ‘Bygate’ test
Academic Literacy – the ‘Bygate’ test

• I would say: ‘I got a book, Bygate, it’s about speaking. […] The most frequent sentence in my assignments would be ‘according to Bygate in certain year, […]’ Gradually the writer’s name becomes meaningful.

(Chi - Interview Month 9)
Shared repertoire

- In this task I think my writing is not so academic, it’s more close to creative writing, I would think about rhetoric, or I would use the words, for example I ‘found the engine that propelled me in language learning’ [reading from assignment, page 3] but now probably I won’t use a sentence like that. […] that helped me to become a successful language learner’

(Chi - Interview Month 9)
Mutual Engagement

- Engaged diversity
- Doing things together
- Relationships
- Social complexity
- Community maintenance
Mutual Engagement

• Classmates: They are almost as important as my own reading. We had so many discussions everyday. No matter it is on the way to lecture or during lunch break. It is great to have someone who is doing (and also worrying) the same thing as you do. And by these discussions, many confusions and doubts were solved.

(Chi - Ejournal Month 2)
Mutual Engagement

Collaborative learning

• Lin: [...] we cancelled the [study] group because [...] we haven’t the class time, that means we all should have studied by ourselves. In this way, everybody has his or her private time [...] and secondly maybe as the time goes on we think we have a, how to say, the higher ability to do things, to think things by ourselves so we think maybe is less essential for us to have to discuss together maybe.

(Lin - Interview Month 8)
Mutual Engagement

- Peng: Actually, I think I quite like the idea of using Blackboard [...] 
- Chi: When I was talking about with another classmate we think that the reason less people using Blackboard is because most of us are from Asian countries [...] 
- Peng: I think maybe one of the reasons that Blackboard is not assessed [...] maybe, most of us from Asia, and we are used to being forced by our tutors [...] 
- Ilan: It is initiated by the tutors, and when people asked questions, we don’t want to look stupid [...] 

(from Focus Group discussion Month 5)
Engagement and language

• [...] the class is based on what we’ve read. And if I don’t understand as much as they [L1 students] do obviously I will have less things to say. And I think because of them, like I said their thought processes are just so much quicker than mine that they digest fast and they analyse it in a very … I would say in like a very advanced way. [...] Last week we had a class, I was talking about [country 1] saying that you know the democracy level’s still quite low and if you say something against the government you’ll be locked up and stuff. And this girl who’s British and she went ‘What’s that got to do with foreign policy?’ And I was like ‘Mm, yes, what does it have to do with foreign policy?’ And another girl helped out, she’s British as well. And she said ‘I think what she means is about the democratisation of the state. If you’re more democratic your foreign policy will reflect that.’ So she was just explaining on my behalf. And I was thinking okay I could have done it, I could have said what she said. But it just wasn’t in my head. And I sat there and I’m like ‘Mm, that [name 2], she’s dangerous’ (laughs) ‘I’ll look out for her.’ (laughs)

SILP - Rebecca (1M2m) Interview
Mutual Engagement

• Mutual engagement among many students is limited;
• Mutual engagement between tutors and students is limited by hierarchy – and hierarchy is given substance by assessment practices;
• L2 students view language as an engagement issue.
Mutual engagement

• A lack of mutuality in the course of engagement creates relations of marginality that can reach deeply into our identities.

(Wenger, 1998:193)
Joint Enterprise

- Negotiated enterprise
- Mutual accountability
- Interpretations
- Rhythms
- Local response
Joint Enterprise

- Assessment in practice may limit learning in community. It isolates, standardises, and homogenizes.
- The effect is disproportionate for international students who do not share the repertoire.
- Language identity and other marginalising experiences contribute to alienation.
Joint Enterprise

- We [Lin and Language Tutor to whom she was referred] came to the conclusion that the problem was because I wanted to make longer and more complicated sentences, in this way, maybe I was confused by my own sentence structure. The clarity is the most important thing compared to complication and length of sentences.

  (Lin - Ejournal Month 2)
Joint Enterprise

- Lin: Yeah, I think one point is I like to write the long sentences [...] I can’t say it’s from the teaching in Chinese university or something like that because we usually have the kind of impression that as for the sentence the longer the better
- Int: Why is it better?
- Lin: I think I learnt it from the teachers [laughter] if you can make the sentence structure more complex, if you can use more complex vocabulary or words you will get the high points in the writing task.

(Lin - Interview Month 9)
Language and assessment

• I felt that I have to read to understand certain concepts many times before I can understand it thoroughly. I don’t know if this is because English is not my native language or is it because the text is difficult to grasp.

• I have been experiencing emotional stress since I felt that I haven’t been performing so well in the programme.

SILP - Dora (3D1k) Journal
Language and assessment

- Sometimes I’m just confused. […] When I hand in I don’t have any confidence in this piece of work. […] I just feel very scared and put it in the box.

SILP - Brenda (2M1f) Interview
Language and assessment

At the beginning for doing assignments the written language also has some difficulties. Because I always have the Chinese way of thinking. I’m writing the things probably not catching the main points, just wandering around the points that I should really hit. I think that’s the problem.

SILP - Angela (1M1c) Interview
At the beginning of the course, my reading ability was not that good. The lowest score in my IELTS exam was that of reading ... In the first week of the programme, I received at least four articles to read. They took me the whole weekend to finish and not necessarily with complete understanding of what are written. Week after week, the load of articles is increasing. Besides, there are lists of key readings that our tutors suggest to read.

SILP – Cindy (3M1G) Journal
Conclusion

• Communities of practice, like all human institutions, also have a downside. They can hoard knowledge, limit expertise, and hold others hostage to their expertise.

Wenger et al 2002:139
Conclusion – Ways forward

- Assessment – the UK problem in HE, and in particular in a second language;
- Development of postgraduate programmes and pedagogies – the role of community, practice and observation;
- Biography and assessment – understanding trajectories and transformation.
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Thank you