

**SME leaders' learning in networked learning:  
An Actor-network theory and Communities of Practice theory informed analysis**

**Susan M. Smith**

**BA (Hons)**

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy**

**February 2011**

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**Abstract**

This thesis brings a Communities of Practice perspective together with Actor-network theory to provide a rich understanding of the social learning processes of SME leaders within a networked learning programme. Networked learning as an educational approach is a growing area in higher education. The networked learning programme under investigation forms part of the knowledge exchange initiatives at Lancaster university management school. The research explores the learning process through a qualitative, inductive approach underpinned by an (online and offline) ethnography and is supported by qualitative interviews, the researcher's own reflections and other secondary data.

The study focuses on three main issues. Firstly, it provides an in-depth understanding of the way a learning community comes together. Secondly, it shows how delegates learn through co-constructing knowledge and the practices within the learning community. It is proposed that the learning community constructs, learns and challenges the situated curriculum. This takes place through the process of legitimate peripheral participation. Gaining fuller

participation leads to an increased identification with that of 'leader'. Thirdly, the study theorises four conceptual learning spaces to show where the delegates learn. They are conceived of as an effect of the delegates' engagement with the integrated learning model underpinning the networked learning programme.

The thesis concludes with a discussion presenting a set of learning and design principles. These can be used to inform the design and thinking around networked learning and knowledge exchange.

Combining the theoretical frameworks of Actor-network theory and Communities of Practice theory is unique in the context of exploring the learning processes within networked learning. This combination stretches aspects of the main tenets of each theory and offers contributions to all three theoretical frameworks.

## **AUTHOR DECLARATION**

I confirm that this thesis has been completed in its entirety by the candidate. I confirm that it has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

A combination of chapters 2 and 7 has been published in the following:

Smith, S., Rose, M and Hamilton, E. (2010) “The story of a university knowledge exchange actor-network told through the sociology of translation: A case study.” *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour & Research*, 16(6), 502-516.

The article uses the sociology of translation as set out in chapter 7 to show how a knowledge exchange actor-network came into being. The same framework is used in the thesis to show how the LEAD actor network is constructed. The overview of knowledge exchange and higher education in chapter 2 is also published within this article.

Parts of chapter 8 are due to be published in the following:

Smith, S (forthcoming) “How do small business owner-managers learn leadership through networked learning?” in Dirckinck-Holmfeld, L., Hodgson, V. and McConnell, D. (Eds) *Exploring the Theory, Pedagogy and Practice of Networked Learning* to be published by Springer, NY, 2011.

The book chapter draws upon the data analysis presented in chapter 8 to show how a social identity is created through the construction of a situated curriculum.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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My wholehearted thanks go to my supervisors, Professor Mary Rose and Professor Vivien Hodgson. Thank you for believing in me. Thank you also for your positive support and for helping to make this experience an enjoyable one.

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I offer my thanks to all the delegates across all the LEAD programmes I have run, particularly cohort 7 and the members of the action learning set I observed. The next few hundred pages could not have happened without them.

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## **INTRODUCTION TO PART ONE: SETTING THE SCENE**

The first part of this thesis provides an introduction (chapter 1) and the context of the study (chapter 2). The aim of this is to give the reader an easily readable account of the contributions of the research along with a detailed understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Contributions of this research
- 1.3 Research Questions and Process
- 1.4 Theoretical lenses
- 1.5 Structure of the thesis

### **1.1 Introduction**

“No community can fully design the learning of another. And at the same time: no community can fully design its own learning.”

(Wenger, 1998, p.234)

This chapter frames the introduction to the thesis. I discuss the main areas in which this thesis contributes to. This is followed by a brief outline of the research questions and process along with the theoretical frameworks that are used to analyse the data. A brief synopsis of each chapter within the thesis is presented along with table 1 outlining the structure of the thesis.



## 1.2 Contributions of this research

The focus of this study is the learning experiences of a group of small business leaders<sup>1</sup> on a networked learning<sup>2</sup> leadership programme called LEAD. Networked learning is gaining increasing momentum in higher education (HE) as an approach to learning which is based on a participative pedagogy and supports collaboration between learners. The literature on small businesses highlights the isolation and loneliness experienced by owner-managers. The collaborative and participative approach to learning underpinning LEAD responds to these feelings. Through an integrated learning model the programme relies on the dialogical creation of meaning and construction of knowledge through peer-to-peer learning. It assumes a social view of learning and includes learner-directed styles of learning and interactive approaches for the delegates to learn from each other and the knowledge they have about running small businesses. This thesis adds to our understanding of how and why participative pedagogies enable peer-to-peer learning and how to design for networked learning.

The networked learning programme in this study forms part of the knowledge exchange initiatives<sup>3</sup> at Lancaster university, an activity whereby small to medium sized enterprises<sup>4</sup> (SMEs) receive business support in order to develop their businesses. Networked learning still has some way to go to fully realise its potential within and by the HE sector and it has been underutilised as a learning approach for knowledge exchange. This thesis contributes to our understanding of how networked learning can be used in HE to work with SME leaders. Further, it argues that this can be an effective mechanism for knowledge exchange within HE.

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘owner-managers’ will also be used to refer to SME leaders. The label ‘leader’ is not one which the leader of an SME would use to refer to him or herself and thus it is a rhetorical tool used to refer to the subjects in this study.

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘networked learning’ used here draws upon the approach outlined by the *E-quality in e-learning Manifesto* (E-Quality Network, 2002) and Goodyear et al. (2004) which draws on theories supporting social learning and social constructionism in relation to technology-supported management education which promotes connections between learners and resources. A detailed discussion of networked learning is presented in chapter 5.

<sup>3</sup> Knowledge exchange is explained in more detail in chapter 2, section 2.

<sup>4</sup> The definition of an SME is a company which employs up to 250 employees.

This research was inspired by the impact of university engagement with SMEs.<sup>5</sup> It explores in depth the learning processes within the networked learning community under investigation in order to better understand how knowledge exchange uses networked learning. It thus adds to our understanding of designing for networked learning arguing that using technology in learning should not replace sound pedagogy. Accordingly, the thesis develops a set of principles for the design of networked learning for SME leaders. These principles respond to the call for educationalists to share the practice of networked learning to enable the implementation of rich forms of the approach (Beaty et al., 2010).

This study contributes to networked learning by drawing on perspectives outside the networked learning literature. Using Actor-network theory (ANT), Situated Learning theory (SLT) and Communities of Practice (CoP) theory<sup>6</sup> as theoretical frameworks and lenses for analyses, this study enriches our understanding of how and where learning takes place within networked learning. Specifically it helps to understand how the learning community co-constructs knowledge viewing knowledge and learning as socially situated concepts. Using ANT and SLT/CoP theory together is relatively unique. In doing so, a number of concepts emerge which stretch some of the key tenets of each theory. Accordingly, it adds to our understanding of learning, the construction and circulation of knowledge and the importance of identity in relation to these theoretical frameworks.

Originally, CoP theory advocated the spontaneity of CoPs arguing that they could not be purposefully formed by organizations. Later debates, which are located in organizational learning, proposed that CoPs can be cultivated. This study conceptualises the learning community as a CoP. This challenges parts of CoP theory stretching our understanding of how a multi-organizational CoP can be constructed in order to learn from one another. This study argues that CoPs of small business leaders can be constructed and brought together through networked learning. The research also builds upon the work of Fox (2005) who uses ANT in relation to networked learning in HE. Conceptualising the learning community as an actor-network

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<sup>5</sup> The impact of this work is demonstrated within A D Little (2003), Wren and Jones (2006) and the LEAD evaluation document (2006).

<sup>6</sup> CoP theory is considered to be part of SLT and although they both have different features they are used together as theoretical frameworks within this study.

contributes to ANT by examining how the members contribute to the enrolment process through the stabilization of the LEAD identity as the owner-managers are translated into LEAD delegates and leaders. ANT is a theory of knowledge and this thesis develops its use as an emergent learning theory as it helps to understand learning as a network effect.

The research builds upon the social learning theories proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) which view learning as situated or embedded within activity. Learning arises from participation in and gaining recognised membership within a community. Identity is a major part of learning. The strong link between the identity of the learner as a *learner* (referred to as a LEAD delegate) is linked to the process of legitimate peripheral participation whereby the learner gains fuller membership as a LEAD delegate. Increased identification with leadership is a result of fuller participation as a delegate. This identity is socially constructed through the construction and circulation of knowledge through relational dialogue. Learning how to be a delegate is as important as learning to be a leader.

The relationship between teachers/facilitators and learners in networked learning is based on collaboration and co-construction of knowledge rather than on that of expert and acolyte. This study explores the enabling nature of this relationship. Facilitators are viewed as enablers of the social construction of the delegates' identities. The study highlights the importance of the facilitators within networked learning for creating opportunities for learning and for the community maintenance. It is thus argued that reflexivity is needed on the part of educationalists and learners.

Social theories of learning are concerned with the practices within learning communities. In seeking to understand the learning processes the study explores how the learning community develops the situated curriculum (Gherardi et al., 1998) which is co-constructed between the delegates and facilitators. Together with the increased identification with leadership this construction is part of the development of a social identity of a LEAD delegate. Understanding the practices of this community can contribute to social theories of learning in order to develop our understanding of the complexities of learning within networked learning for SME leaders.

Our understanding about learning using technology is changing our ideas about learning spaces. Space and learning spaces are of particular interest to networked learning scholars. The study conceptualises an alternative way of looking at learning spaces which calls for a different understanding of space within learning communities and networked learning. The learning spaces within this study are conceived of as both constructs and effects of the learning community's engagement with the integrated learning model. Used in this way they can be seen as a very compelling way to rethink how facilitators in networked learning can support the learners. More so the view centres very sharply on the social view of learning explored throughout this thesis and seeks to contribute to networked learning and the social theories of learning of SLT and CoP theory.

### **1.3 Research Questions and Process**

The phenomenon being studied is a networked learning leadership programme called LEAD, which is made up of leaders of small businesses. There is little written within the literature on SMEs or entrepreneurship generally that addresses networked learning within or for the SME community. As a networked learning programme LEAD is underpinned by a participative pedagogy whereby knowledge is viewed as being socially constructed. The aim of this thesis is to explore the learning processes within networked learning for SME leaders. Fundamentally, I am concerned with how SME leaders learn and how to construct learning environments which enable this community to have a real impact back in their own businesses. The overarching research questions are:<sup>7</sup>

1. How is a networked learning community of SME leaders constructed?
2. How do SME leaders learn in networked learning?
3. Where do SME leaders learn in networked learning?

The study adopts a qualitative approach. Specifically, an ethnographic study was undertaken of one cohort of LEAD, including a virtual ethnography of the LEAD

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<sup>7</sup> The research process is discussed at length in chapter 6, specifically in section 6.7.

forum (an online discussion space). The ethnography is supplemented by interviews from delegates on this cohort and from five previous cohorts. Additional data such as emails and my own reflections in my ethnographic diary are also used within the ethnography.

#### **1.4 Theoretical lenses**

The theoretical lenses of ANT and SLT/CoP theory are used for the analyses which form the basis of discussion across the three data analysis chapters (chapters 7, 8 and 9). Networked learning is the context of the analysis and can be seen as adopting a pedagogy rooted in collaborative learning. Through the lens of SLT/CoP theory the study seeks to understand how a learning community can be constructed as a CoP and how this CoP generates and circulates knowledge. Through the lens of ANT the study seeks to understand the role of human and non-human actors in the construction of the actor-network and how learning and learners are seen as network effects. I aim to show how SLT/CoP theory and ANT can inform research into SME leaders and networked learning. The frameworks are used to understand identity within a learning community and the practices within it. In turn this study aims to contribute to the theoretical frameworks from the perspectives of networked learning, SME leaders and knowledge exchange.

#### **1.5 Structure of the thesis**

The thesis is split into five parts as shown in table 1. Part one presents this introduction and the context of the study. Part two consists of the literature reviews. Part three describes the methodological approach to the study. Part four consists of the data analysis chapters, which lay the foundations for part five which presents the discussion and conclusions.

Part One: Setting the Scene	
Chapter 1 Introduction	Chapter 2 Networked Learning, Knowledge Exchange and Higher Education

Part Two: Literature Reviews		
Chapter 3 Actor-network theory	Chapter 4 Situated Learning Theory and Communities of Practice	Chapter 5 Networked Learning and SMEs
Summary of Part Two		

Part Three: Methodology	
Chapter 6 Research Methodology	

Part Four: Data Analysis		
Chapter 7 Constructing a Peer Learning Community	Chapter 8 The Situated Curriculum	Chapter 9 Learning Spaces

Part Five: Discussion and Conclusions	
Chapter 10 Networked Learning Principles and SMEs	Chapter 11 Conclusions

**Table 1: Structure of the thesis**

The main thesis begins with **chapter 2** which contextualises the study. Here a background to three main areas is given; networked learning; knowledge exchange; and higher education. These three are inextricably linked in this study.

Part two of the thesis incorporates the literature reviews across chapters 3, 4 and 5. In **chapter 3** the key themes within ANT are discussed which shows how it has been

used by other disciplines and how it is being used in management studies in relation to learning.

**Chapter 4** presents an overview of CoP theory locating it in SLT. The discussion shows why this is useful and relevant to the study of SMEs and networked learning.

In the final literature review, **chapter 5** discusses the key literature within networked learning in relation to this thesis. The context of the study is networked learning so it is critical to understand what networked learning is in relation to SME leaders, HE and knowledge exchange.

A **Summary of part one** is presented to bring the three literature reviews together as a basis of understanding firstly, why I am researching SMEs and networked learning and secondly, how they can contribute to the methodology and data analysis. Additionally, the rationale for using ANT and SLT/CoP together as lenses for analysis is discussed.

Part three of the thesis incorporates the methodology. **Chapter 6** presents the methodology in two parts. The first part provides an overview of why I am studying this phenomenon and describes my research journey, including the pilot research. The second part outlines the main project and the methods used to answer the research questions: how and where do SME leaders learn in networked learning and how is the learning community constructed?

Part four of the thesis incorporates the data analysis chapters 7, 8 and 9. **Chapter 7** looks at how a learning community is constructed through the lenses of CoP and ANT. This chapter helps to frame LEAD as the unit of analysis both conceptually across many cohorts of LEAD and practically by analysing one cohort (cohort 7) in detail.

**Chapter 8** asks, “How do SME leaders learn on LEAD?” The concept of the situated curriculum (Gherardi et al., 1998) is used to show that LEAD has its own co-constructed situated curriculum. In doing so it is argued that the delegates learn to *become* delegates and during this process they identify more fully with leadership.

**Chapter 9** asks, “Where do SME leaders learn on LEAD?” This chapter is more inductive and presents four conceptual learning spaces that arise from LEAD, they are: (1) peer-to-peer; (2) social; (3) reflective; and (4) peripheral learning spaces.

The three data analysis chapters are brought together in **chapter 10** which discusses key learning principles from the study. It presents a set of design principles for the design of networked learning in relation to SME leaders, HE and knowledge exchange.

The thesis ends with conclusions in **chapter 11** that shows where the contributions of the thesis lie. It also considers the limitations of the study and looks at areas for future research.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **NETWORKED LEARNING, KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE AND HIGHER EDUCATION**

#### **CHAPTER 2:**

#### **NETWORKED LEARNING, KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE AND HIGHER EDUCATION**

- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Knowledge exchange and higher education
- 2.3 Background on LEAD
- 2.4 Overview of LEAD
- 2.5 Networked learning, LEAD and pedagogical approach
- 2.6 Desired learning outcomes
- 2.7 Why I am studying this phenomenon
- 2.8 Summary

#### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides the reader with an overview of the phenomenon being studied: LEAD - a leadership and management networked learning programme for SME leaders. Firstly, an overview of the context of the study is presented; the political agenda of government, knowledge exchange and HE. This discussion includes a brief overview of SMEs in relation to productivity in the United Kingdom (UK). Following this a detailed overview of LEAD is presented which outlines the integrated learning model which is discussed throughout the thesis. The pedagogy underpinning LEAD is discussed; this frames the approach to how the programme is run and the desired learning outcomes. Finally, a rationale of why this phenomenon is being studied is presented.

## 2.2 Knowledge exchange and higher education

The Small Business Service shows that in 2005 there were an estimated 4.3 million businesses in the UK. The vast majority of these were small businesses (with fewer than 50 employees) and they provided 47% of the UK private sector employment and 36% of turnover (Small Business Service, 2006). Small firms, virtually no matter how they are defined, make up at least 95% of enterprises in the European Community. Within the UK, SMEs account for 99% of all businesses (Carter and Jones-Evans, 2006). Today even the casual newspaper reader knows about the key role which small firms play in employment creation, their overall importance in the economy, their role in innovation and the importance which government attaches to ‘enterprise’ (Storey, 1994, p. 1). By just about any measure the contribution small firms make to the economy of any country is increasing and their importance is now fully recognised (Burns, 2007).

A flourishing small business sector is central to economic growth in the UK. Universities are seen as one way of achieving this through the knowledge exchange agenda (see Lambert Review, 2003; Benneworth and Charles, 2007; Athey et al., 2007). Universities are playing an increasingly important role in regional economic development, and development agencies are taking an active role in building bridges between business and universities across the regions and nations (Lambert Review, 2003, p. 13). Successive UK governments since the mid-1980s have argued that universities should be making a greater contribution to raising the global competitiveness of the UK economy (Cox and Taylor, 2006, p. 117). Transferring the knowledge and skills between universities and business and the wider community increases the economic and social returns from this investment (Lambert Review, 2003, p.39). Since the 1990s ‘third mission work’ or ‘knowledge transfer’, better named ‘knowledge exchange’<sup>8</sup>, has complemented the traditional role of universities. Driven by the Labour government agenda<sup>9</sup> universities have been encouraged and funded to develop knowledge exchange activities. Knowledge exchange is seen as a

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<sup>8</sup> These three terms are used interchangeably but the preferred term within this thesis is ‘knowledge exchange’ because it implies that there is an exchange back from the business community into the university rather than the transferring of ‘knowledge’ from the university to the business community.

<sup>9</sup> The Labour government was in power between 1997 and 2010 and knowledge exchange gained increasing significance throughout this period. Unless indicated otherwise ‘the government’ refers to the Labour government during this period.

way to boost world class excellence and strengthen the work of universities in supporting the regional economies (Lambert Review, 2003). Education institutions are regarded as having an important role in raising the productivity of local businesses, and are incentivised to increase knowledge transfer (Williams et al., 2008, p. 31). This has consequently added a new dimension to the way in which universities are funded (Cox and Taylor, 2006; Robson et al., 1997). Funding such as the Higher Education Reach Out to Business and the Community (HEROBC) was followed by the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) aimed at strengthening links between HE and business through knowledge exchange. However, the Lambert Review (2003) recognises that there is no single model for a university to undertake knowledge transfer/exchange activities, stating that:

“...some take in knowledge transfer and technology transfer activities, while others keep the two activities separate and have established specialised companies to manage technology transfer. The appropriate approach will vary depending on the needs of local business, the mission of the university, and the focus of the local economy” (p.50).

Knowledge exchange has been a growing activity within universities. Ritchie and Lam (2006) mapped and evaluated the research and policy evidence from a major conference against the seven strategic themes published in the UK's Small Business Service policy document. They note that knowledge transfer was a main focus for many of the papers. McAdam and Marlow (2008) look at networking activities within a university incubator which supports the growth of new businesses. Specifically, they show that once trust was established links with university academics and personnel facilitated knowledge transfer. Knowledge exchange can also work the other way round through releasing entrepreneurial potential within universities through entrepreneurial academics (Brennan and McGowan, 2006) or facilitating and strengthening links between graduates and the SME sector (Mukhtar et al., 1999). Choeke and Armstrong (1998) look at the opportunities and barriers with regards to the relationship between HE and SMEs. They suggest that a major part of the fault lies with the HE sector in that it has the opportunity to make stronger local links with SMEs yet often fails to do so.

It is important to understand the political agenda which has supported universities in widening their knowledge exchange activities as LEAD was established within and partly because of this political landscape.

### **2.3 Background on LEAD**

This study is part of the knowledge exchange activities within the Institute for Entrepreneurship and Enterprise Development (IEED), a department in the management school at Lancaster university. The knowledge exchange work of the IEED has focused on the small business sector<sup>10</sup>, assisting over 1500 SMEs since 2001 whilst also developing strong collaborations with government bodies such as the Regional Development Agency and Business Link.<sup>11</sup> This work has facilitated an in-depth understanding of the needs of SMEs and what interventions can provide meaningful support. It has highlighted that working with the owner-manager (or a decision maker) on their own development and the strategy of the business had a definite impact on the business's bottom line.<sup>12</sup> In this sense the leadership of the owner-manager<sup>13</sup> is seen to have an impact on the performance of the business. The management and leadership capability is thus a key factor in SME survival and growth. Similarly, one of the government's key aims as outlined in the Skills White Paper is to improve leadership and management capability: "Effective leadership and management are key to the development of competitive businesses" (DfES, 2003, chapter 2, 2.14). Likewise the Framework for Regional Employment and Skills Action identified the need to take action to address regional management capability, not only because it affects performance and productivity of individual companies, but also because it impacts on the ability of business leaders to address the skills gap by managing wider skills development within these businesses (Framework for Regional Employment and Skills Action, 2002). An extensive mapping report carried out by

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<sup>10</sup> Within the Northwest, SMEs represent 98% of all businesses, with micro-SMEs constituting 89% of this figure (Small Business Service, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> The knowledge exchange work has predominantly been supported through funding from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), HEIF and through the Northwest Regional Development Agency.

<sup>12</sup> A number of different types of formal and informal evaluations have been carried out in conjunction with the requirements of the funding bodies. These have taken place since 2001 and support this finding.

<sup>13</sup> As noted, in relation to the LEAD delegates the terms 'owner-manager' and 'leader' are used interchangeably. Delegates do not often view themselves as leaders and it is a label which educators and policy makers have used to describe SME owner-managers.

the IEED showed that there was no publicly funded leadership provision for owner-managers of SMEs with fewer than 20 employees.<sup>14</sup>

In dialogue with the Northwest Regional Development Agency (NWDA) the IEED developed a leadership programme to respond to the lack of leadership provision for SMEs. This programme was funded by the NWDA for two years, focusing on developing the leadership capacity of small businesses. It was called LEAD, standing for “Leading Enterprise and Development” and was piloted from 2004 to 2006 with an aim to engage nearly 70 owner-managers from micro SMEs which employ fewer than 20 people, to provide learning opportunities for them to develop their leadership capabilities. The project was designed to benefit the region’s micro companies by providing access to the highest quality leadership development to individual owner-managers.<sup>15</sup> The SME sector is under-represented in training programmes with most, if not all, other training programmes being designed for and marketed to managers within larger companies (Smith and Peters, 2006). The main objective of the programme was to raise regional productivity, competitiveness and skills by addressing issues of leadership within the context of the SME sector generally and in particular within the owner-manager’s business. The programme ran as four cohorts with between 16 and 19 delegates per cohort. Each cohort started the course sequentially and was given similar learning opportunities, which are outlined in section 2.4 in the overview of LEAD. Evaluation of LEAD has shown that on average the small businesses increased their turnover by £200k per annum (Wren and Jones, 2006). This evaluation has also shown, amongst other things, that delegates felt more confident in taking risks, had a more motivated workforce, had better delegation skills and feel they had developed their leadership skills. The impact of the programme led to a large scale £15m roll out across 15 providers (including Lancaster university) in Northwest England<sup>16</sup> and Wales<sup>17</sup> delivering LEAD to 1750 SMEs by 2015.

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<sup>14</sup> There were programmes targeting companies of between 20-250 employees such as the Leadership and Management Pathfinder programme, known as Lancashire Leaders.

<sup>15</sup> Lancaster university management school is one of two six star rated management schools in the UK.

<sup>16</sup> See <http://www.businesslinknw.co.uk/Beagoodleader/LEAD/Pages/default.aspx>

<sup>17</sup> See <http://www.swan.ac.uk/business/LEADWalesProject/>

It is important to note that LEAD was developed in an environment whereby knowledge exchange is researched, developed and facilitated/delivered.<sup>18</sup> Initially funded by the NWDA to raise regional productivity LEAD was partly driven by the regional and national policy agendas in relation to skills, HE and knowledge exchange to support businesses that would otherwise not be able to access this kind of provision. It was solely designed by the IEED and owes much to the absorptive capacity (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990) within the IEED to create a programme that was and is both robust in its pedagogy and flexible enough to move with the needs of the delegates in response to and in dialogue with them.<sup>19</sup> The integrated learning model of LEAD provides fertile ground for SME peer-to-peer learning as well as for trust to develop between the members. The IEED's knowledge and experience of working with SMEs was a key factor in being able to successfully design, recruit for and develop the programme. LEAD continues to be run by the IEED annually. A more detailed description of the programme is now given.

## 2.4 Overview of LEAD

LEAD takes place over a ten month period in cohorts of up to 25 owner-managers of SMEs throughout the Northwest of England. The programme adopts an integrated learning approach to develop both the owner-manager and the business through master classes, coaching, action learning, learning and reflection sessions, business shadowing and business exchanges, which are described in more detail below. A virtual learning environment (VLE) supports communication and peer-to-peer interaction between everyone involved in LEAD (delegates and facilitators<sup>20</sup>) when not physically together.<sup>21</sup> Each element of LEAD was designed to meet the needs of

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<sup>18</sup> The term 'delivered' is part of the discourse surrounding the knowledge exchange. The role of Lancaster university management school and knowledge exchange is discussed further in Cox and Taylor (2006) and Smith, Hamilton and Rose (2010).

<sup>19</sup> More information on LEAD plus a full evaluation report can be found on <http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/departments/Entrep/Projects/lead/>

<sup>20</sup> The term facilitator is used to represent other terms such as teacher and lecturer for instance but is more appropriate in a networked learning setting whereby 'facilitators' are part of the connectivity or as Jones and Steeples (2002) argue, 'the guide on the side' rather than 'the sage on the stage'.

<sup>21</sup> There have been a number of platforms used for the VLE but the aim has consistently been to provide a shared, confidential space for the LEAD delegates. It was initially used for posting course information and organising social events but the delegates also use it to discuss the content of master classes, to ask one another for business help and to continue their action learning set discussions online in a confidential space.

SME owner-managers as learners and over the last six years the programme has changed in response to an ongoing dialogue with the delegates and the research data. In brief the following key learning processes are central to the design of LEAD:

#### *Taught learning*

The taught aspects of the integrated learning model focus largely on the master classes. However, as LEAD is based on a social view of learning the master classes are designed to create awareness and potential re-evaluation of key areas shaping the business. The emphasis is on stimulating awareness of key issues relating to business and leadership. Delegates are asked to identify ‘golden nuggets’ from the taught elements and to share these with one another (i.e. pertinent points that they take away).

#### *Observational learning*

SME owner-managers have limited opportunities to learn how to develop their leadership capabilities. The integrated learning model provides multiple opportunities for the delegates to observe each other’s leadership practices as well as meeting inspirational leaders from different sectors to learn about their own leadership styles.

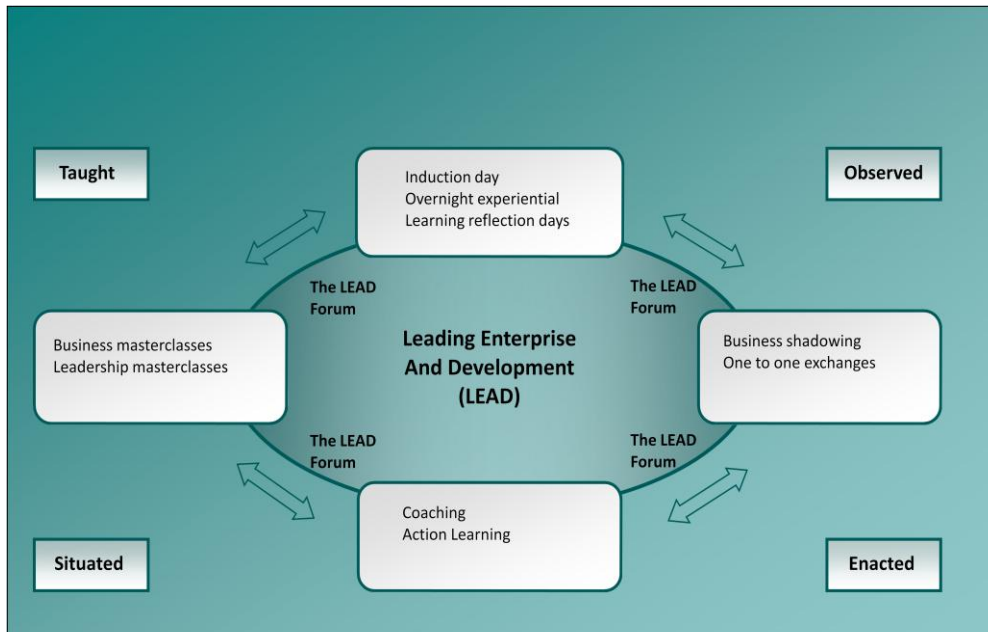
#### *Enacted learning*

Delegates are encouraged to try out what they are learning through enactment. The emphasis across LEAD is on developing their critical thinking skills and learning techniques such as open questioning to use when addressing problems, issues and opportunities in their workplace (and inevitably their personal lives too). Enacting the learning helps them to refine the observed and taught learning in action.

#### *Situated learning*

To ensure the enactment is context relevant and not artificial for the delegates it is essential that the delegates take their learning back to their own organizations. They are encouraged to try out new ways of working and leading. Situating the learning in their businesses ensures that it has relevance and applicability.

Figure 1 shows the integrated learning model and the different components or ‘learning interventions’ are outlined in more detail below.



**Figure 1: The LEAD integrated learning model**

It is important to note that there is a recruitment and selection process for SME leaders wishing to have a place on the programme. This is to ensure that the learning community is made up of committed individuals who are willing to share their experiences and seek to develop new ways of thinking about themselves as leaders in order to help their businesses grow. LEAD therefore is not suitable for every owner-manager and the selection process involves preview sessions, taster events and group interviews. This is part of the process of ensuring that ‘appropriate’ SME leaders are recruited and also that they feel LEAD is appropriate for them. Additionally, because LEAD is part funded by the government there are a set of criteria which the SME leader has to meet.<sup>22</sup>

### **Induction day**

The induction day takes place at the university and is designed primarily around ‘getting to know you’ activities. It also aims to cover some of the basic information the delegates will need to know about the university, such as: parking; health and

<sup>22</sup> A LEAD delegate has to be the owner-manager or a director of the company and the business has to be over five years old. See <http://www.businesslinknw.co.uk/Beagoodleader/LEAD/Pages/default.aspx> for more details.



safety; fire alarms; and other relevant administrative aspects. A lot of emphasis is placed on encouraging the delegates to begin to share their stories, hopes and aspirations for LEAD and for their businesses.

### **Overnight Experiential**

A two day, overnight experiential session aims to lay the foundations of trust and confidentiality between the delegates through practical activities, discussion and reflection and to ground the learning in the delegates' own businesses. It takes place away from the university at a rural retreat. The delegates stay overnight and there is an evening meal followed by optional socialising in the bar. During this time a learning contract is discussed which addresses what they want from each other. Confidentiality is always discussed during this process and the delegates define what they mean by this and what this means for their cohort as well as how to deal with the information they share between each other.

### **Master classes**

There are twelve master classes: six on the theme of leadership, run by different leaders and inspirational speakers; and six on the theme of business growth, run by academic faculty. The master classes are designed to act as stimuli to generate discussion rather than content based teaching. Delegates are encouraged to find their own 'golden nuggets' from each session and to share these on the LEAD forum (see below). They take place in lecture theatres at the university and delegates are invited to bring appropriate guests from their companies who they think will benefit from the experience.

### **Coaching**

Each delegate is assigned a professional executive coach to provide a confidential space to work through issues through a 'solutions focus' approach (see Jackson, 2002). Normally, the first face-to-face coaching session takes place in a meeting room at the university and then the coach and delegate decide where is appropriate to carry

out the remaining five sessions. Normally, these take place over the phone. Sessions are arranged at the convenience of the delegate.

### **Action learning**

Action learning sets (ALS)<sup>23</sup> are made up of six to seven delegates with a facilitator, meeting six times over the ten months to provide the opportunity to address real issues through open questions and dialogue (see Smith, 2009 for a discussion on action learning and LEAD). The ALS take place in a meeting room at the university. Normally, the delegates and facilitator sit in a circle on comfortable chairs. Ground rules are established by the members of each ALS. The facilitator follows the approach of Revans (1983) and matches the criteria set out by Pedler et al. (2005) whereby questioning is the main way to help participants proceed with their problems, and learning is from reflection on actions taken.

### **Business shadowing and exchanges**

A series of business shadowing and exchanges are designed for delegates to learn about each other's organizations, get feedback on their own leadership style and see their own organization through a fresh pair of eyes. Delegates work in pairs or threes and set their own objectives for what they want out of this experience. The shadowing and exchanges take place in the delegates' companies or an appropriate location of their choosing, depending on how they want to achieve their objectives.

### **Learning and reflection**

Learning and reflection days take place across LEAD to encourage the delegates to reflect upon their learning and plan actions and future needs. These take place at the university, normally in the executive training suite, which has tables and chairs set up in a cabaret style (as opposed to the tiered lecture theatres). These sessions are underpinned with a learning log which is filled out by the delegates. They also have the option of using an online learning log which is a private space on the LEAD

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<sup>23</sup> ALS is used to refer to both the singular and plural of action learning set/s.

forum. These sessions aim to help the delegates develop critical understanding of their own (and others') practices and aim to help the delegates become 'reflective practitioners' who adopt a continual interweaving of thinking and doing (Schön, 1983)

### **The LEAD forum**

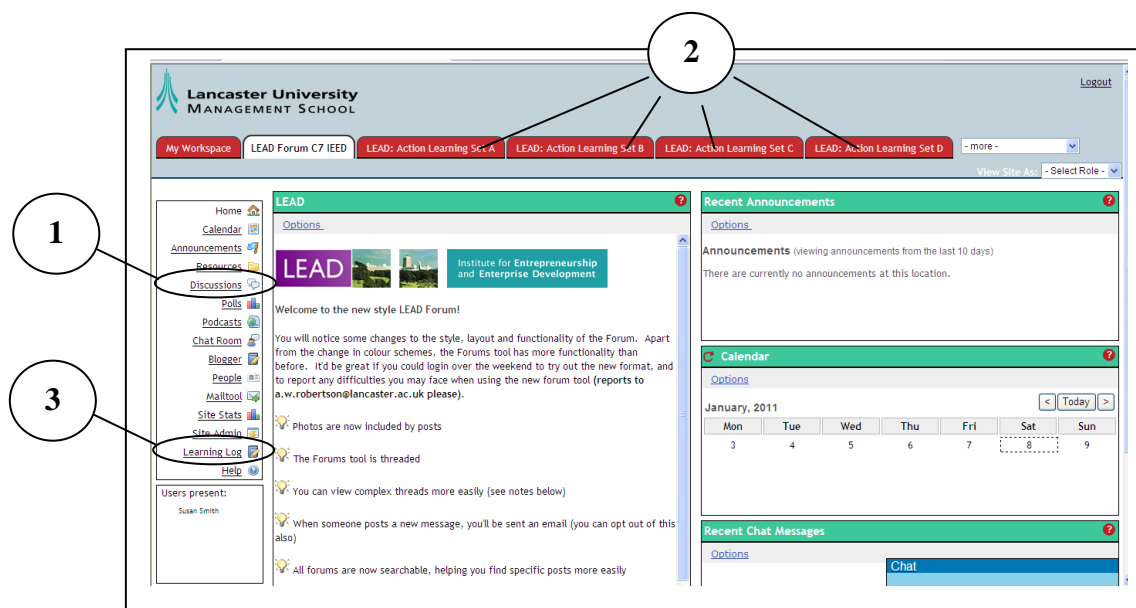
The term 'the LEAD forum' is used to refer to the VLE which predominantly focuses on discussion through forums.<sup>24</sup> It provides a confidential space for the delegates to ask questions, share learning points and to post and download resources. There are three main areas to the forum which are visually represented in figure 2 below:

- (1) A general discussion space which is open to the whole cohort (and the LEAD team). Here, discussions focus on the different elements of the integrated learning model and delegates share their learning experiences and also talk about their businesses, their issues, ask for advice from each other and also arrange social activities. The LEAD team facilitates discussions and activities and also uses this space for administrative aspects of the programme (e.g. reminders about the time of a master class).
- (2) Each ALS has its own discussion space which is only seen by the members of the respective ALS and their facilitator. Here they can continue talking about the ALS and how they are getting on with the issues they have been discussing. It is also used by the facilitator to discuss administrative aspects such as setting dates for future meetings.
- (3) Each delegate has an area on the LEAD forum for a learning log. It is only seen by the delegate and the LEAD team. The LEAD team post questions in the learning log to prompt the delegate to think about their learning and encourage them to write about it. The LEAD team comment as appropriate on what the delegate has written and ask further questions to prompt more

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<sup>24</sup> The actual platform is called 'sakai' which is a portal created by Lancaster university and is tailored to each programme in dialogue with the course designers, facilitators and technicians. See <https://sakai.lancs.ac.uk/portal>

reflection about what they have written. The delegates are not obliged to write online learning logs and some are more active than others in this area.



**Figure 2: Example screen grab of the LEAD forum**

There are other tools which the delegates use such as the calendar, podcasts (of the master classes) and the chat room but the most used areas are those presented above.

## 2.5 Networked learning, LEAD and pedagogical approach

LEAD is a networked learning programme based on a social theory of learning and is influenced largely by SLT, whereby learning is situated or embedded within activity. Learning arises from participation in a community and gaining recognised membership within that community (see Lave and Wenger, 1991). The activity for the delegates on the programme is their own work practices as owner-managers of SMEs. In other words the learning they experience as a result of LEAD is situated back into their own contexts. Hodgson (2009) makes the link between SLT and management education arguing that becoming a member of a community can be interpreted as:

“...learning through participation in the pedagogy and curriculum of a given educational programme. Through this participation ‘students’

learn how to be a participant or member of a given knowledge community and acquire the language and an identity that is recognised by that community” (p. 131).

LEAD is rooted in a participative pedagogy and as a networked learning programme it aims to support participative approaches to learning as proposed by Hodgson and Reynolds (2005, p.11). LEAD encourages the participants to learn from each other, relying less on the tutor(s) as the “sage on the stage” but as the “guide on the side” (Jones and Steeples, 2002, p.9). It supports a social view of learning that relies upon peer-to peer learning to make sense of the taught, situated, observed and enacted learning as shown in figure 1 above. This pedagogy is based on constructionist views of knowledge which requires the delegates to engage with the ideas that come from the different elements of LEAD and to develop skills and capabilities relevant to their own situations back in their businesses. In CoP terms it enables them to address problems and share knowledge (Wenger, 2004). The circulation of knowledge within LEAD comes largely from the delegates and their experiences of running small businesses. This pedagogy includes learner-directed styles of learning and interactive approaches for the delegates to learn from each other and the knowledge they have about running small businesses.

In terms of networked learning I specifically refer to the definition of networked (management) learning as drawing mostly on theories supporting social learning and social constructionism in relation to technology-supported management education. The *E-quality in e-learning Manifesto* presents a working definition of networked (e)learning:

“Networked e-learning refers to those learning situations and contexts which, through the use of ICT, allow learners to be connected with other people (for example, learners, teachers/tutors, mentors, librarians, technical assistants) and with shared, information rich resources. Networked e-learning also views learners as contributing to the development of these learning resources and information of various kinds and types” (E-Quality Network, 2002, p. 5).

Recently, these authors have called for a re-visit to this manifesto and definition (Beatty et al., 2010) but the definition is used here to show the perspective used in relation to LEAD as a networked learning programme. Further, LEAD is based on the relationship between teachers and learners, itself based on collaboration and co-construction of knowledge rather than on that of expert and acolyte (E-Quality Network, 2002, p.6). Such a collaborative and participative approach to learning relies on the dialogical creation of meaning and construction of knowledge, as discussed by Hodgson and Watland (2004b, p.126) which is a key asset that new communication technology affords to management learning. However, this does not mean that technology determines such an outcome, rather the pedagogy that underpins the approach encourages participation; ICTs can support this but will not achieve participation on their own. Parchoma and Dykes (2008, p.5) address this and argue: “networked learning and communities can provide unique opportunities to use technology to enhance, *not* replace, sound pedagogy” (emphasis in the original). Greener and Perriton (2005) argue that networked learning opens up new avenues in pedagogy enabling communities of learners to come together. LEAD enables the community of SME owner-manager learners to come together. As is discussed in more depth in the data analysis chapters (7, 8 and 9) the design of LEAD was influenced in response to the loneliness and isolation experienced by owner-managers (Smith and Peters, 2006). In its design there are a number of desired learning outcomes which are now described.

## **2.6 Desired learning outcomes**

Predominantly LEAD aims to develop the leadership capabilities of owner-managers of SMEs. The approach focuses on providing them the opportunities to learn leadership through social interactions from other SME owner-managers. The longer term goals of the programme are to help develop critical reflective thinking skills so that the delegates can solve current and future issues that they inevitably face in their organizations. The reflective learning practices should be especially relevant in the SME environment where there is nobody for the owner-manager to turn to for advice, and no training courses on offer to fill knowledge and skills gaps. The course was designed so that participants could, in effect, teach themselves and then pass on this learning to their staff to encourage a culture of leadership and self-perpetuating

development: double-loop learning (Deakins and Freel, 1998; Cope, 2003, 2005; Argyris, 1976). Through engagement with the integrated learning model it is hoped that the delegates will, as one delegate described: “work on the business, not in the business” (Laura, cohort 1). Arguably LEAD should provide what Jones et al. (2007, p.281) term ‘strategic space’, defined as the:

“...time, resources, motivation and capabilities needed for owner-managers to reflect on and review existing practices leading to learning, transformation and higher organizational performance.”

Additionally, it is hoped that a trusted peer network of like-minded people will develop which can be used to seek help, address problems and share knowledge for the time they are on LEAD and in the future. These desired learning outcomes should lead to more effective businesses which are stronger and could lead to economic development in the region.

## **2.7 Why I am studying this phenomenon**

To finish this chapter I want to outline why I am studying the phenomenon of LEAD as both a networked learning programme and as a knowledge exchange activity. In chapter 5 I discuss the difference between e-learning (which emphasizes the technology) and networked learning (which emphasizes the connections between learners and resources rooted in a participative pedagogy). However, in practice this difference between the two is often blurred. Much energy has been spent on the role of ICTs in achieving mass education (see Fox, 2005). Such a focus can lead to large amounts of public money being spent on initiatives which fail, such as the £55 million investment in the UK eUniversity (UKeU). This promised to provide anytime, anywhere access via the internet to the vast resources of universities and develop collaborative, supportive learning communities (Garret, 2004, 2003; Universitas 21, 2007). In 2004 it was announced that the project should be wound up given that it recruited only 900 students: “Thus, the overall concept of a ‘UK e-University’ lasted four-and-a-half years, while the operational phase lasted just over two. Even by the standards of e-learning burn-outs, this was fast” (Bacsich, 2005, p.1). Certainly, we need to learn from such expensive failures such as the UKeU (see Garret, 2004 for a

more detailed discussion). Although this initiative may not be considered to be networked learning as outlined by E-Quality Network (2002), I think the lessons learned from such a failure can inform our understanding of how to ensure networked learning programmes are well designed and can deliver what they promise. As Parchoma and Dykes (2008, p. 635) argue: “all forms of networked learning have often been over-sold by proponents and genericised by critics.”

Coupled with the need to understand how universities can capitalise on networked learning and design programmes based on sound pedagogy to meet the needs of the learners, the drive for UK universities to engage in business support for regional economic development needs further attention particularly in relation to how this can be realised through networked learning. One of the core aims of this thesis is to contribute to our understanding of networked learning and how this knowledge can be used to inform the practices of networked learning design and knowledge exchange activities.

## **2.8 Summary**

This chapter has contextualised the study by providing an overview of the knowledge exchange agenda in which the programme under investigation resides. It has shown that successive governments since the 1980s have viewed universities as vehicles for exchange knowledge. Specifically the knowledge exchange agenda sees universities as broadening their streams of activity to support regional businesses, in particular SMEs, for the economic benefit of the region. In this case the region is the Northwest of England. Having located the study within the political and knowledge exchange agenda this chapter went on to give a detailed overview of the LEAD programme and its integrated learning model along with the desired learning outcomes. The different learning interventions which make up the integrated learning model are referred to throughout the rest of the thesis so it was important to present this background information in detail for the benefit of the reader. Finally, a rationale for studying LEAD was presented.

This concludes part one of the thesis. Part two of the thesis presents the three literature reviews of ANT, SLT and CoP, and networked learning.



## **INTRODUCTION TO PART TWO: LITERATURE REVIEWS**

The following three chapters offer a comprehensive and detailed literature review of the key texts and discussions within three key areas relevant to this thesis, ANT, SLT and CoP, and networked learning. Chapters 3 and 4 outline the theoretical frameworks of ANT and CoP which are used to analyse the data in chapters 7, 8 and 9. The context of the thesis is networked learning and chapter 5 presents the debates that are relevant to the study of networked learning.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the key themes in ANT and some of the opportunities that are emerging from using ANT within management disciplines are explored. I show how I intend to use it to develop it further as a learning theory. In chapter 4 the background to CoP theory is discussed in relation to how it can be used in conjunction with ANT to increase our understanding of how and where learning takes place within networked learning. Key elements in CoP theory and SLT are considered and some of the criticisms associated with this approach are explored. These first two literature reviews cover the two main theoretical frameworks for research and data analysis. These are returned to in the data analysis chapters. The third literature review, chapter 5, covers networked learning which is the context in which this study is located and to which body this thesis makes its main contribution.

The three literature reviews form the basis of understanding firstly, why I am researching SMEs and networked learning and secondly, how they can contribute to the methodology and data analysis. These chapters are brought together with a summary of part two outlining how SLT/CoP and ANT have been used within networked learning. This summary provides a rationale for using these theoretical frameworks as lenses for analysis highlighting the uniqueness of the combination in relation to SMEs and networked learning.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY**

#### CHAPTER 3

#### ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY

- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Origins and Background
- 3.3 Generalized Symmetry
- 3.4 Networks
- 3.5 Translation
- 3.6 Obligatory Passage Points
- 3.7 Stabilization
- 3.8 Criticisms of ANT
  - 3.8.1 De-humanising the human
  - 3.8.2 Descriptive not critical
  - 3.8.3 A theory of what?
  - 3.8.4 Power
- 3.9 Critical considerations of ANT in relation to learning
- 3.10 Summary

### **3.1 Introduction**

Fox (2005, p. 108) argues that ANT raises questions for networked learning in the context of HE because it helps us to see the mutual dependence between human meanings and mundane technologies. The context of this study is networked learning, which incorporates technology to connect learners to resources. As such ANT is used as a theoretical framework to help our understanding of the learning processes within networked learning. ANT is complemented by SLT/CoP theory to analyse how and where learning takes place for SME leaders within networked learning. The aim of

this chapter is to give a comprehensive overview of the main concepts within ANT and show how they are relevant to this thesis. ANT has been used by many different disciplines and has been regarded as a theory of knowledge (Law, 1992). I explore ANT as an emergent theory of learning. It is important therefore to appreciate its lineage and how it has been appropriated by different disciplines. This helps to show how and why the key tenets of ANT are used to make sense of the learning processes under investigation.

Firstly, I detail what ANT is and how it developed. This is followed by an overview of the key concepts within ANT where criticisms of the approach are considered. This overview is needed as these key concepts are used in the data analysis. I then show how ANT has been used by other disciplines, namely in the field of management and, more specifically, as an emergent learning theory. Finally, I critically review this literature in relation to this thesis, which explores SME leaders' learning in networked learning.

### **3.2 Origins and Background**

ANT was principally developed by three sociologists, Callon (1986a, 1986b, 1987), Latour (1983, 1987, 1988) and Law (1986a, 1986b, 1987) and looks at science and society as a series of 'networks' interacting. Early work done from the actor-network perspective provided a series of case studies of the construction of scientific/technological artefacts or knowledge-claims. ANT theorists propose that science and society co-evolve from the construction and maintenance of actor-networks. They argue that the development of scientific knowledge must be studied in the social context of which it forms a part and not adhere to dichotomies such as science/society or nature/culture. Latour (2005, p.61) states that a good ANT study is one that follows the actors and traces the social connections in new and interesting ways. Law (1996) uses Akrich's (1992) study of the technology transfer of briquettes in Sweden to Nicaragua as an exemplary actor-network study. There are two points that he refers to which are relevant to this thesis which are:

- Her work both assumes and explores the idea that building and maintaining networks is an uphill battle - that enrolment is precarious
- Networks are processes or achievements rather than relations or structures that are given in the order of things

(Law 1996, p.3)

Studies such as Akrich's detail the process of how a heterogeneous network, an actor-network, comes into being. This study incorporates many of these aspects with a particular focus on the enrolment process. ANT has been considered to be a process-oriented sociology (Law, 1992) that provides an array of concepts, techniques and principles with which to examine the construction of relationships between 'science' and 'society'. Callon (1986b) states that ANT attempts to offer a perspective, complete with its own language, for analysing the co-evolution of society, technological artefacts and knowledge of nature. The key themes within the ANT perspective are addressed with explanations pertaining to the use of its own language. These are: generalized symmetry; networks; translation; obligatory passage points; and stabilization. It is important to understand these main points of ANT because they emerge when ANT is used as a theory of knowledge and in its embryonic state as an emergent learning theory.

### **3.3 Generalized Symmetry**

A key tenet in ANT is that the "stuff of the social isn't simply human"; (Law, 1992, p. 381) and for Latour (1992, p.241) actors are entities that do things. ANT theorists would purport that an actor is always a network and a network is a set of roles played by technical materials and humans. ANT assigns equal amounts of agency to human and non-human actors. This is referred to as the principle of generalized symmetry, which calls for the analytical treatment of human and non-human actors (see Callon, 1986b; Collins and Yearly, 1992). In other words the two sets of actors should be integrated into the same conceptual framework. This means that, from an epistemological point of view, things are as important as people in the constitution of collectives (Latour, 2005). Latour (1994) argues for the dichotomy of social/technical to be erased arguing for them to be studied using a generalized principle of symmetry

between humans and non-humans that disputes the unique position of humans. For Bijker (1995), symmetry means avoiding explaining the success or failure of technologies by whether or not they work. For them: “machines “work” because they have been accepted by relevant social groups” (p.270). Feenberg (1999) says that ANT argues that the social alliances in which technology is constructed are bound together by the very artefacts they create. Thus social groups do not precede and constitute technology, but emerge with it.

The process of generalized symmetry treats humans and non-humans as interactive effects. Michael (1996, p. 53) states that generalized symmetry is “the use of an abstract and neutral vocabulary to understand the conflicting viewpoints of actors, entities or actants.”<sup>25</sup> Suchman (2000) takes this further and is concerned with finding an ontology that can tie humans and non-humans together without erasing the culturally and historically constituted differences among them. Those differences, she says, include the fact that persons just are those ‘actants’ that conceive and initiate technological projects, and configure material-semiotic networks, however much we may be simultaneously interpellated into and through them (Suchman, 2000).

It is important to bring the dualist paradigm of human/non-human to the fore but it does seem that we could get caught up going round in circles trying to erase the difference between humans and non-humans. In tandem with generalized symmetry is generalized agnosticism which describes the analytical impartiality of the analyst. Generalized agnosticism advocates that the analyst does not take sides or adopt a viewpoint or stance (see Singleton, 1995). This point is useful in a methodological sense. Bijker, (1995, p. 325) warns us against producing a priori distinctions that are to be studied as constructed rather than given. Other authors such as Feenberg (1999) argue that the dichotomy has a certain validity, for without it, he says, there would be no technical disciplines. For the purposes of this review it is sufficient to say that ANT does not celebrate the idea that there is a difference between humans and non-humans. As Law (1992, p.383) argues, that it denies that people are necessarily special although this is an analytical stance not an ethical one.

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<sup>25</sup> In ANT actors are often referred to as actants to avoid the anthropomorphism of non human actors.

Moving on from the basis of the principle of symmetry, ANT theorists characterize actor-networks as heterogeneous networks. Entities gain their identity only through other identities, through interactive relations (Miettinen, 1999, p. 176). These interactive relations consist of heterogeneous materials, including human and non-humans, which I now discuss.

### **3.4 Networks**

The term network is defined as a “group of unspecified relationships among entities of which the nature itself is undetermined” (Callon, 1993, p.263). ANT considers that an actor is always a network. Callon (1987) states:

“The actor network is reducible neither to an actor alone nor to a network. Like networks it is composed of a series of heterogeneous elements, animate and inanimate, that have been linked to one another for a certain period of time.... An actor network is simultaneously an actor whose activity is networking heterogeneous elements and a network that is able to redefine and transform what it is made of” ( p.93).

Law proposes that the concept of actor-networks is a way of suggesting that society, organisations, agents and machines are effects generated in patterns of diverse materials that are not simply human (Law, 1992, p. 381). This metaphor of the heterogeneous network lies at the heart of ANT. Law (1992) applies ANT to the diagnosis of science hypothesising that it is a process of ‘heterogeneous engineering’, in which bits and pieces from the social, the technical, the conceptual and the textual are fitted together, and so converted (or ‘translated’) into a set of equally heterogeneous scientific products. Law continues by noting that this is a radical claim because these networks are composed not only of people but also of machines, animals, texts or any other material (Law, 1992, p.381). Although the dualist paradigm of social/technical is erased with generalized symmetry Law acknowledges that all networks participate in the social (ibid, p. 382). In the reappraisal of his work, Latour (2005, p. 55) takes this a step further by showing how his practical metaphysics can recognise the agency of actor’s beliefs, for example if someone was inspired by God to act in a particular way we should recognize the ontological weight

of their claim. Networks allow actors to translate their objectives into other actors. This process is used as a framework in the data analysis in chapter 7 to understand how a learning community comes together. Within a heterogeneous network what is important to Law are the network builders or ‘heterogeneous engineers’ because they manage the linking of different types of human and non-human elements. The conversion of these social and technical bits and pieces is presented as a process called translation which is now discussed.

### **3.5 Translation**

An actor-network is created or formed through the process of translation and all the actors are enrolled into a network by this process. The specific process is outlined here because this process-oriented sociology, as it is referred to by Law (1992), has been used to understand learning in HE (see Fox, 2005; 2009). Thus it forms the basis of how ANT has been used as an emergent learning theory. The process is used in detail in the data analysis so it is important that the main concepts are outlined here. Translation does not attempt to explain why a network exists; it is more interested in the infrastructure of actor-networks. Typically it has been used to show how artefacts become indispensable or not to the worlds in which they circulate, and to which they can contribute. The process of translation involves negotiations among human and non-human actors/actants which serve to define their interests and actions in the network. The approach details the processes of enrolment rather than the resultant framework. Callon (1986a) proposes a ‘sociology of translation’ to show how an actor-network is created and how actors assume certain roles within the network in relation to one another. It is through this understanding that the actor-network starts to develop and the social structures comprising both social and non-human entities are shaped and consolidated. Callon and Latour (1981, p.279) state:

“By translation we understand all the negotiations, intrigues, calculations, acts of persuasion and violence thanks to which an actor or force takes, or causes to be conferred to itself, authority to speak or act on behalf of another actor or force.”

The process of translation can be used as a theoretical framework *and* as a methodology. In this study the main concepts of ANT are used as a theoretical framework and the process of translation is used methodologically following the principles set out below. The theoretical framework of ANT and the process of translation are used in chapter 7 to show how a learning community is constructed, conceptualising it as an actor-network. It is therefore important to outline the steps in translation.

Within the process of translation numerous actors may be involved in different stages, each with their own unique characteristics and outcomes. For purposes of clarity, it is useful to focus on a single actor, from whose vantage point we wish to see the process of translation. Callon (1986a) identifies four processes of translation:

### 1. Problematization

As the term suggests a ‘problem’ is recognised, for example, for Callon (1986a) this was how to develop a conservation strategy for the declining scallop population in St. Briec Bay. The primary actors were the marine biologists who proposed to develop this conservation strategy which would have a long term positive economic benefit for the fisherman. The first moment of translation normally involves a focal actor defining the interests of other actors that are consistent with their own interests (Callon, 1986a).

### 2. Interessement

The next stage of translation is ‘interessement’, to be ‘interested’; which is to be ‘in-between’ (inter-esse), to be ‘interposed’ (Callon, 1986a). In Callon’s example this is the series of processes by which the marine biologists seek to lock the other actors into their identified roles. To interest other actors is to build devices which can be placed between them and all other entities who want to define their identities otherwise (Callon, 1986a, p. 9).

### 3. Enrolment

This is the process of aligning the actors’ interests with the actor-network. For Callon (1986a) the actors to be enrolled are the fisherman, the scallops and scientific



colleagues. During enrolment the actor-network starts to take shape with actors including humans and non-humans. Law (1996, p. 3) points out that enrolment is precarious; links and nodes in a network do not last all by themselves, they need constant maintenance work.

#### 4. Mobilization of allies

The final stage of translation sees the primary actors assume a spokesperson role for passive network actors and seek to mobilize them to action. For Callon (1986a) one example is how a few representatives give the green light to the restocking project of the scallops on behalf of all the fishermen.

The process of translation is usually used empirically. Law notes that ANT almost always approaches its tasks empirically: “so the empirical conclusion is that translation is contingent, local and variable” (Law, 1992, p.387). This may be one of the reasons why ANT has itself been translated by different disciplines, because the analysis is also always local and variable. Translation explains how networks come into being and is used in chapter 7 as a theoretical framework to show how the LEAD learning community comes together. It is also used methodologically whereby actors are followed and the connections and relations across the actor-network explored. The debates and tensions around whether ANT is a methodology or a theory are discussed below. There is one final point in the process of translation that spans across theory/methodology which centres on the stabilization of the actor-network. In order to stabilize the actor-network actors need to pass through obligatory passage points.

### **3.6 Obligatory Passage Points**

Translation (and ANT in general) is concerned with how actors and organizations mobilise, juxtapose and hold together bits and pieces out of which they are composed (Law, 1992, p. 386). As different actors are enrolled into a network, Miettinen (1999, p. 172) states:

“The spokesman transforms the interests and forces of the other actors and makes participation in the network an obligatory passage point or

necessity to them. The associations between human and nonhuman actors or elements build networks. The more actors mobilized, the stronger and more durable the network.”

During enrolment then, actors being enrolled into the network must pass through obligatory passage points. For Callon (1986a) it is a point where anyone with a stake in the network would have to pass through in order to achieve their goals. For the success of an actor-network all the entities must play their part and this involves passing through the obligatory passage point. Actors which do not pass through the obligatory passage point will not be part of the actor-network in question (they may form parts of other actor-networks). Passing through the obligatory passage point makes the actor indispensable to the network. An example of an obligatory passage point that is relevant to this thesis can be shown in Fox’s (2005) example of networked learning in HE. Fox (2005, p. 106-7) shows how teachers in elite HE act as obligatory passage points through which people have to pass through in order to become (translated into) learners. Fox shows that this process involves such activities as buying books, joining in an educated, critical-thinking democracy and becoming a member of a particular profession. Networked learning is part of this socialization process, which involves becoming IT literate. Potential learners need to pass through the obligatory passage points of the teachers who design and participate in networked learning.

Obligatory passage points are an important aspect of translation; as Callon (1986a) points out the whole actor-world is unreliable and can break down. This supports Law’s (1992) view that an actor-network is contingent. This contingency and unreliability is addressed when the actor-network is stabilized. In the data analysis I use this to show the role of the primary actor (the management school) as an obligatory passage point that seeks to stabilize the LEAD actor-network.

### **3.7 Stabilization**

An actor-network is susceptible to breaking down and as Law (1992, 1996) argues the creation of an actor-network is not a linear process but one which involves many of the processes within translation being repeated. It is recognised that the actor-network

is not a stable entity, as with Law's (1992, 1996) comments on enrolment being precarious, the whole actor-network is precarious. The act of stabilization is also local and contingent but for an actor-network to come into being and to survive it needs to be stabilized. Law (1987, p. 113) argues that the stability and form of artefacts should be seen as a function of the interaction of heterogeneous elements as these are shaped and assimilated into a network. Accordingly, the stability and form of the entire actor-network should also be seen as a function of the same interaction. Certainly, it is in the interest of all actors to stabilize the network as this influences their own survival as part of the actor-network. The stability of a network depends on the "impossibility it creates of returning to a situation in which its [current form] was only one [of many] possible option among others" (Callon, 1992, p.89). It follows then that an actor-network which is stable is considered to be 'black boxed'. Typically, black-boxing refers to artefacts that have been transformed into a black box once the actor-network is stabilized. For example a washing machine may be considered to be black boxed, achieving the same outputs (clean clothes) with the same inputs (dirty clothes plus washing powder). The term can be applied to any actor-network that is made up of heterogeneous actors. Callon (1992, p.91) says that a network starts to become heavy with norms of all sorts. It is these norms that I am interested in and how we can understand how a learning community learns by exploring what these norms mean within the context of the actor-network.

I now discuss some of the criticisms of ANT before showing how it is emerging as a learning theory which is applicable to my research.

### **3.8 Criticisms of ANT**

ANT is not without its critics, even from the main ANT theorists themselves. Latour's main criticism is the metaphor of 'network' developed before the term had taken on its contemporary, technology-related connotations which was used ahead of its use now. He argues that:

"Now the World Wide Web exists, everyone believes they understand what a network is. While twenty years ago there was still some freshness in the term as a critical tool" (Latour, 1999, p. 15).

For Law (1996), in ANT, 'network' meant a series of translations or stories. Latour argues that now it means a "transport without deformation...an unmediated access to every piece of information, the opposite of what the ANT theorists meant" (1999, p.15). He does suggest that if we still want to use the terms 'actor' and 'network' they should designate two faces of the same phenomenon: 'actor' is not here to play the role of agency and 'network' to play the role of society (ibid, p. 18). Finally Latour suggests that:

"There is life after ANT, that is to continue all the way to develop its strange potential and some other creature will emerge, light and beautiful from our collective achievement" (1999, p. 24).

However, in his book *Reassembling the Social* Latour (2005) revisits his earlier (1999) claim in which he advocates putting the nail in the coffin of ANT. He even goes so far as apologizing that in this work he takes the exact opposite position as the one he took in his 1999 piece, saying he will now defend all the elements he once criticized (Latour, 2005, p. 9). Here he says that the name - ANT - is so awkward, so confusing, so meaningless that it deserves to be kept (ibid, p. 9). The aim of this book for Latour is to go back to ANT's original meaning in order to trace connections again (ibid, p. 1). Latour (2005, p. 12) introduces ANT not as a theory so much but as a method, of which the main principle is following the actors i.e. tracing their multiple associations and translations. In this sense: "Actors do the sociology for the sociologists and sociologists learn from the actors what makes up their set of associations" (ibid, p. 32). Although Latour revisited and (re)presented ANT in this work and did address some of the criticisms surrounding ANT there are still some that are outstanding. I have grouped some of the common themes into headings to show how it has been critiqued.

### **3.8.1 De-humanising the human**

By allowing non-humans the same status as humans, Law (1996) says that ANT has been criticised for dehumanising the human. Certainly, it does not celebrate the idea that there is a difference in kind between people on the one hand, and objects on the other. However, as mentioned above, Law (1992, p.383) states that this is an

analytical stance not an ethical one. The main critique of the principle of generalized symmetry is presented by Collins and Yearly (1992) who argue that actor-network practices are conservative, prosaic and even dangerous. Using the example of Callon's (1986a) scallops not anchoring and therefore not being translated into the network, they argue that the tale is one of asymmetry and is an old-fashioned scientific story. Callon and Latour (1992, p. 345) respond to Collins and Yearley saying that:

“...in spite of what we claim, we are accused of going back to the realist position to explain scientific facts and to technical determinism to account for artefacts.”

As an account of the relationships between technology and society Collins and Yearley (1992) argue that Callon's study is a fine one. However, as a social account of the making of knowledge they find it prosaic. Collins and Yearley (1992) worry that non-human agency would collapse critical distance in studies of science and technology by relying on scientific expertise to decipher “how much” agency non-humans have in a given situation. They urge actor-network theorists to give explanations rather than descriptions, which leads on to the next criticism: that ANT lacks criticality.

### **3.8.2 Descriptive not critical**

ANT is a relational and process-oriented sociology that treats agents, organizations, and devices as interactive effects (Law, 1992). As such it should be seen as a set of concepts or ideas which provide a sensitising tool for interpreting the formation of and actions within networks. However, Callon (1999, p.182) argues that ANT can be seen to be so tolerant that it ends up presenting an actor which is an anonymous, ill-defined and indiscernible entity. It is this aspect which has produced the most negative effects and led to the frequent accusation of relativism whereby ANT is criticised for not being critical, rather, it just describes. However, some disciplines, such as geography have used it as an interpretive tool (see Murdoch, 1997, for example). When approached from another angle, that of deciding what to explain, Miettinen (1999) states that ANT faces the same problem as positivistic empiricism did: ‘How is it possible to decide what is important and essential and what is not without theoretical

preconceptions?’ (p. 181). The problem then is what counts as an actor? Even with the prescribed agnosticism the researcher has to select between actors in terms of their relevance, which relies on certain assumptions being made. These assumptions have been addressed by Bloomfield and Vurdubakis (1999, p. 631) who argue that actor-network theorists are faced with the need to specify which entities are relevantly part of the ‘network’ under study. Further, they say that it might seem impossible to determine what the relevant facts are (ibid).

It appears then that ANT theorists can be accused to some extent of being both positivistic and relativist (a concern that does not go unnoticed by Collins and Yearley, 1992). Latour (1999, p. 21) states that ANT does not tell anyone the shape that is to be drawn but only how to go about systematically recording the world-building abilities of the sites to be documented and registered. He says it does:

“...not claim to explain the actors’ behaviour and reasons, but only to find the procedures which render actors able to negotiate their ways through one another’s world-building activity” (Latour, 1999, p. 21).

Elsewhere, Latour states that the main tenet of ANT is that actors themselves make everything, including their own theories, contexts, metaphysics, even their own ontologies (2004, p. 67). This view has led to ANT being accused of being uncritical, but conversely it has been used ‘critically’ within critical sociology (Callon and Law, 1997) and critical thinking around information systems (Amsterdamska, 1990). Law (1992) underscores the need to be critical towards the unit of analysis. He says:

“...it is a good idea not to take it for granted that there is a macrosocial system on the one hand, and bits and pieces of derivative microsocial detail on the other. If we do this we close off most of the interesting questions about the origins of power and organisation” (Law, 1992, p. 380).

In terms of explaining actions, Fox (2005, p. 102) points out:

“...actor-network theory informed analysis is not to explain the size of any network but rather to elucidate *how any* network grows in influence ....the analytical interest is to illuminate *the processes*, rather than explain the end results” (emphasis in the original).

In the context of this study I agree with Fox in that ANT is a useful framework which illuminates the processes of how an actor-network comes together and shows learning as a network effect. Being descriptive, ANT is actually useful in relation to this thesis as principles of it are used theoretically and methodologically. However it has been accused of not being clear about whether it is a theory and if it is, what it is a theory of. This is a point which I now address.

### **3.8.3 A theory of what?**

Law asks whether there is such thing as ‘actor-network theory’ at all. His answer is both yes and no. Yes, he says as “we can certainly make a story that tells of unity” (1996, p.4) and no, because “it is just as easy to tell tales of a kind of diaspora, of interaction with other theories” (ibid). Latour (1999, p. 22) asks if it is a theory, it is a theory of what? His answer: “it is a theory of a space in which the social has become a certain type of circulation” (ibid).

In his introduction to the book *Actor-network Theory and After* Law (1999, p. 4) recognises that much ink has been spilled over the human/non-human debate and proposes that ANT should be understood as a “*semiotics of materiality*” (emphasis in the original). He states:

“It takes the semiotic insight, that of the relationality of entities, the notion that they are produced in relations, and applies this ruthlessly to all materials – and not simply to those that are linguistic” (ibid).

Law continues to note that the naming of ANT has done it some harm as well as some good. He says that the desire to name it, to know clearly what we are talking about, has turned ANT into a theory (1999, p. 8). This fixed tag also means that ANT is diasporic and it has spread into something new, into many things that are new and

different from one another (Law, 1999, p.10). Latour returns to ANT's origins to argue that the vocabulary of 'translation', 'obligatory passage point' and so on were ways in which the social scientist could connect with the actor's practice through some research protocol (ibid). This means then that ANT is a theory that says by following circulations we can get more than by defining entities, essence or province (ibid). Further, he says:

“..it is also, like ethnomethodology, simply a way for the social scientists to access sites, a method and not a theory, a way to travel from one spot to the next, from one field site to the next not an interpretation of what actors do simply glossed in a different more palatable and more universalist language” (Latour, 1999, p.20).

Arguably, ANT can be seen as a theoretical framework and/or a methodological device. It is clear that what it does not do is explain actors' actions, rather it involves “the summing up of interactions through various kinds of devices, inscriptions, forms and formulae, into a very local, very practical, very tiny locus” (Latour, 1999, p. 17). In this thesis ANT is used as a theoretical framework alongside SLT/CoP theory to help understand how and where SME leaders learn in networked learning, conceiving the learning community as an actor-network and a CoP (which is discussed in chapters 3 and 7).

### **3.8.4 Power**

There is tension in the debates with how ANT deals with power within actor-networks. McBride (2003, p. 278) argues, uncritical use of ANT may fail to take account of power structures and the influence of balances of power on how the network develops and what inscriptions<sup>26</sup> are promoted. However, Law argues that ANT employs a distinctive approach to issues of power, stating:

“...actor-network theory is all about power – power as a (concealed or misrepresented) *effect*, rather than power as a set of causes. Here it is close

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<sup>26</sup> The notion of inscription refers to the way technical artefacts embody the vision of the designer or innovator for that object (see Akrich, 1992).



to Foucault (1979), but it is not simply Foucauldian for, eschewing the synchronic, it tells empirical stories about processes of translation” (1992, p. 387, emphasis in the original).

In *The Pasteurization of France* Latour (1988) shows how Pasteur introduced the microbe into French society. In doing so other actors were displaced and Pasteur was given power as the only credible spokesperson for this new actor. This echoes Callon’s (1986a) tale of the declining scallop population whereby the researchers acted as ‘the spokesperson’ on behalf of the fishermen and even the larvae. For Callon:

“Understanding what sociologists generally call power relationships means describing the way in which actors are defined, associated and simultaneously obliged to remain faithful to their alliances” (1986a, p. 19).

For Latour (1988) science is politics by other means and therefore power cannot be ignored within ANT accounts and actor-networks generally. As Brown and Capdevila (1999, p. 38) note, networks are assemblages of forces, they emerge from and dissolve into the play of power. Further they address the process of how an actant connects to a network, calling it the “will-to-connect”. This, they say, is the actant’s way of endeavouring to persist in being, which can in a sense be seen as a form of agency (Brown and Capdevila, 1999, p. 41). Law (1992) addresses agency by looking at interaction as “all that there is” (p.380). He looks at how some interactions stabilize themselves and overcome resistance in order to become macro-social and therefore generate effects such as power (ibid). For Law then resistance is bound up with the ordering and organising of heterogeneous materials, human and non-human actors.

These debates on power, resistance, “will-to-connect” and agency are addressed by Fox (2005) who relates them to organizational learning. In his paper, “Communities of Practice, Foucault and actor-network theory” Fox argues that learning is the outcome of a local struggle between the interplay of technology and changes in knowledge and action (2005, p. 860). Learning as an outcome is of interest in the context of this study and I discuss below how ANT is emerging as a learning theory.

These criticisms are relevant to ANT in general and some are more applicable to my research and use of ANT than others. With this in mind I show how ANT is beginning to be used as a learning theory which is directly relevant to my research questions. ANT did not set out to understand how learning takes place within a network so it is unfair to expect it to achieve this un-problematically. I show how it is being used within the discipline of management and I finish with a critical discussion that pertains to SME leadership learning.

### **3.9 Critical considerations of ANT in relation to learning**

*“Have theory will travel”* (Latour, 1999, p. 11).

From ANT’s origins within Science and Technology Studies, Law and Hassard (1999, p.10) argue that ANT is diasporic having spread and converted itself into a range of different practices: cultural studies; social geography; feminist science and technology studies; and organizational analysis. Similarly, Law (1992, p.381) states that what is true for science is also true for other institutions such as the family, the organisation, and computing systems – all of social life may be similarly pictured. ANT has been used widely for a number of different means but a common theme is that of networks. Across disciplines ANT has been used to explore how networks are formed, maintained, or fall apart (see Law, 1992; Brown and Duguid, 1994; Hughes, 1987; Singleton and Michael, 1993; Star, 1991). More recently, ANT has been discussed in relation to organizational learning (Fox, 2000) and networked learning (Fox, 2002). Fox (2005) looks at the concept of community in HE and uses ANT to critique the notion of community. He applies this to networked learning and looks at the implications of community and HE in networked learning as a field of theory and practice. More recently Fox (2009) has explored whether ANT could develop into a learning theory. Fox states that is not a learning theory as such, nor is it a pedagogy, but it is a theory of knowledge (p. 31). This builds on Law’s (1992) proposal that it was a theory of knowledge but his main claim was that ANT was a theory of agency and machines also. Fox’s (2009, p. 34) argument is that ANT assumes learning takes place between people and their technologies and although it is not a learning theory his argument follows that it could be. Fox (2005) looks at how community is perceived using Benedict Anderson’s (1991) notion of the imagined community to

examine how networked learning is a part of wider techno-social networks building contemporary ideas of community. Fox argues that ANT provides insight into and critiques of the idea of community and HE, and has implications for our understanding of networked learning (2005, p. 102). Whereas Fox's (2005, p.95) focus is to understand how any sense of community is generated and put together, my focus is to understand how and where learning takes place within a networked learning programme of SME leaders and to use ANT as a theoretical framework to help explore these research questions.

Law (1992) states that ANT authors have argued that knowledge is a social product and that it may be seen as a product or an effect of a network of heterogeneous materials. Fox (2009) builds on this by looking at how learners and learning can be seen as network effects. Networked learning can be seen as an actor-network which is made up of heterogeneous materials. Being part of this network involves a process of alignment to provide connections between learners and resources. Networked learning involves connections and ANT theorises connections and relations. Additionally, ANT can be used to tell stories of learning (see Verran, 1999, for example) which can help to understand learning as a network effect. Fox's (2005; 2009) development of ANT into management research and its use in understanding learning as a network effect is an underexplored area. It is this area which is relevant to this thesis which seeks to understand how and where learning takes place in networked learning, conceptualising networked learning as an actor-network. If ANT is to be considered as a learning theory, it should be considered as embryonic and we should recognise what Law (1996, p.4) says about ANT when it passes from one to place to another, that it changes and becomes diverse. This diversity can also bring about problems. Using ANT to understand learning processes asks us to rethink how ANT is used. As Brown and Capdevila (1999) have recognised the translation of ANT into another discipline does not mean that it travels or translates un-problematically. They argue that ANT is no longer the property of the sociology of translation alone, but:

“What we remain less convinced by is the idea that Actor Network Theory can be un-problematically translated across disciplines without something going astray” (Brown and Capdevila, 1999, p.46).

Applying ANT to learning then needs to be done with due care and recognition that something might ‘go astray’. Fox (2005) shows how learning is a network effect but I propose ANT can also be used to understand how learning networks are constructed, or as Fox (2005) says, how actors are translated into learners. In relation to this study I use ANT as a lens to apply to the data in order to show how an SME peer learning network is constructed and how SME leaders learn within networked learning. This research then can contribute to the use of ANT in relation to learning.

One final point to make on ANT in relation to learning is that of the lack of focus on SMEs. It was never intended to be used within management or organization studies and inevitably SMEs feature rarely in ANT studies.<sup>27</sup> This study contributes to understanding how SME leaders learn within networked learning. As such I aim to understand the roles of human and non-human actors within networked learning, an approach which aims to “promote *connections* between one learner and other learners, between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources” (Goodyear et al., 2004, emphasis added). Exploring these connections leads me to look at the margins of the actor-network under investigation alongside SLT/CoP theory which helps to understand how learning takes place. In ANT terms I could be seen to be exploring the process of heterogeneous engineering within networked learning in order to use ANT as a learning theory.

### **3.10 Summary**

In this literature review I have presented the key concepts of ANT that I have deemed relevant to this thesis. I presented a background of ANT outlining its origins. As such I outlined the key concepts, namely: humans and non-humans, generalized symmetry, networks, translation, obligatory passage points and stabilization. It is important to present these concepts as they are used theoretically to analyse the data in this thesis. I then outlined a critical analysis of debates relevant to ANT in the context of this thesis. Further I showed how ANT can be used to contribute to our understanding of learning in HE.

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<sup>27</sup> ANT has been used in relation to SMEs to identify factors affecting the adoption of e-commerce (Tatnall and Burgess, 2004) and to research the implementation of a business to business portal for regional SMEs (Tatnall and Burgess, 2002).

At the beginning of this chapter I drew upon Fox (2005) who argued that ANT raises questions for networked learning in the context of HE because it helps us to see the mutual dependence between human meanings and mundane technologies. I use ANT in order to understand how a learning community, conceived of as an actor-network is constructed and how and where it learns. ANT has not been used in this way before and its use in relation to learning is a new area. ANT is a theory of knowledge and this thesis develops its use as an emergent learning theory. The context of the study is SME leaders and although ANT has been used by management disciplines it has rarely been used to study SMEs. Further, it has not been used to examine a multi-organizational learning community made up of SME leaders. This study uses ANT as a lens for analysis for such a learning community. A more in depth summary of the use of ANT is outlined in the summary of part two.

The purpose of using ANT in the context of this thesis is not to use it unproblematically as a learning theory but to show how it *could* be an emergent learning theory and how to use it as a lens for the analysis. Theories which cross disciplines do not do so without issue, a point I used to close this chapter with. With this in mind I turn to CoP theory to complement ANT in exploring how learning communities are constructed and, specifically, how and where SME leaders learn in networked learning. The following chapter offers a review of the relevant literatures on CoP theory which are located within SLT.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **SITUATED LEARNING THEORY AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE**

#### CHAPTER 4:

#### SITUATED LEARNING THEORY AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Roots of SLT and CoP theory
- 4.3 Communities of Practice
- 4.4. Bringing a learning community into being
- 4.5 Learning within the CoP: Legitimate Peripheral Participation
- 4.6 Learning within the CoP: practice as curriculum
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  - 4.8.1 Conceptualising “community”
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- 4.9 Summary and concluding comments

#### **4.1 Introduction**

The theoretical perspectives of ANT and SLT/CoP theory are used to inform this study to show how SME leaders learn within networked learning. Chapter 3 provided a comprehensive overview of the key debates on ANT and showed how the process of translation is an appropriate lens for analysis within this thesis. ANT has been used within management and organizational learning as an emergent learning theory and goes some way to helping us understand how organizations learn. This chapter complements the previous chapter by focusing explicitly on the learning theories of SLT/CoP to present the key debates in relation to learning and knowledge creation

and knowledge circulation within learning communities. This thesis explores how and where learning takes place within networked learning. Chapter 5 is dedicated to the debates on networked learning and as such the discussions around CoP and ANT relative to networked learning are addressed there.

The objective of this chapter is to critically examine SLT/CoP theory<sup>28</sup> in order to give a comprehensive overview of debates which underpin the theoretical frameworks used in this study. I provide a detailed overview of the rise of SLT located in wider debates on learning theories in general. It is important to trace SLT's genealogy because the perspective of social theories of learning from which it stems is fundamentally different to the dominant view of education whereby knowledge is seen as something to be acquired cognitively from a knowledgeable source. This point of difference is critical to this chapter and the whole thesis as it underpins the philosophical and theoretical frameworks of the study. SLT is the context in which CoP is rooted and I go on to discuss the main concepts of CoP, namely: bringing a learning community into being; legitimate peripheral participation; practice as curriculum; and the free flow of ideas. I then look at the criticisms and limitations of CoP as a theory in the context of this thesis in how it deals with conceptualising a learning community as a CoP, power and the peripheries of communities and small businesses and multi-organizational CoPs.

First I will look at approaches to learning as the context for introducing social learning theories such as CoP theory.

## **4.2 Roots of SLT and CoP theory**

*“Learning, in short, takes place among and through other people.”*  
(Gherardi et al., 1998, p.274).

Higher education (and education in general) is dominated by an approach to learning which sees knowledge as something to be acquired. Freire (1970, p.72) refers to this as the banking concept of education whereby education is an act of depositing, in

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<sup>28</sup> CoP theory is seen to part of the wider social theory of SLT. The two are used together in this thesis although many of the themes used in this thesis could be seen to resonate more with CoP theory.

which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. It is important to highlight this as the dominant view because this thesis draws on and is underpinned by an alternative view of learning which sees knowledge as socially constructed. There are two main areas I cover here that are relevant to this literature review and thesis in general. The first is that of social approaches to learning that challenge the dominant 'acquisition of knowledge' approach and the second is the importance of the socio-cultural approaches to learning within the theory and practice of networked learning. With the increasing dominance of ICT in education, the *E-quality in e-learning Manifesto* notes that many commentators are raising questions about the adequacy of current models and approaches to HE (E-Quality Network, 2002, p.3-4). These arguments, they say, point to the need to move from a predominantly instructional paradigm of teaching and learning to a more constructionist one. This thesis is concerned with understanding how and where learning takes place in networked learning. In chapter 5 I outline in more detail the approach of networked learning I am working with but in short the approach is theoretically associated with social constructionist and relational views of learning (see Hodgson, 2009). This view of networked learning supports a social view of learning whereby knowledge is co-constructed through social participation. SLT and CoP theory have been used in studies of networked learning (for example, Cousin and Deepwell, 2005; Fox 2005) and are used in this study to further our understanding of learning in the context of networked learning. It is therefore necessary to understand what SLT and CoP theory are and how they can be used as theoretical constructs for this study. I will give a brief overview of the traditions in which SLT and CoP are rooted. Additionally, as Contu and Wilmot (2003, p. 284) argue, SLT has been adopted and popularized and in so doing some of the more radical or critical elements in the theory have been marginalized.

Socio-cultural approaches to learning were developed by the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky and his collaborators in the early twentieth century.<sup>29</sup> Socio-cultural theory argues that mental functioning is fundamentally a mediated process organized by cultural artefacts, activities and concepts (Ratner, 2002). Social interaction is seen to play a crucial role in the development of cognition where language plays a

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<sup>29</sup> This socio-cultural approach is sometimes referred to as a cultural-historical approach or tradition.



fundamental part. Typically a cognitivist approach views the learner as being able to consume abstract knowledge which is ‘out there’. However, Vygotsky’s theories focus on cognitive learning through social development that takes place in cultural contexts and is mediated by language. Given the dominance and importance of language and dialogue in networked learning authors have drawn upon the traditions of Vygotsky’s work to apply them to networked learning (see Chapel et al., 2002; Ponti and Hodgson, 2006; Jalil et al., 2010). Most of Vygotsky’s original work focused on the development of language and learning within children. As such he proposed that children learn through interactions with their surrounding culture and that the cognitive development of children is enhanced when they work in their zone of proximal development (ZPD), that is:

“...the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86).

It should be noted that his work focuses on how children learn but his concepts have been used by educationalists for adult learning. Lave and Wenger (1991) highlight that Vygotsky’s ZPD has received vastly different interpretations. They identify with the societal perspective of ZPD which has been used by researchers such Engeström (1987) who share their interest in extending the study of learning beyond the context of pedagogical structuring to the inclusion of the structure of the social world (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 49).

SLT has antecedents in Vygotsky’s work and also that of Rogoff (1990, 1991) (which is rooted in the Vygotskian tradition). Within socio-cultural theory a consistent view is that learning takes place with engagement in everyday activities such as practice in the workplace.<sup>30</sup> Rogoff and Lave (1984) go as far as proposing that it is activity that structures cognition (i.e. thinking is structured by activities that one engages in).

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<sup>30</sup> This is one of the main distinctions between how children and adults learn and how Vygotsky’s work has been used in SLT. The focus for SLT is on practice and the opportunities adults have for learning through their everyday practice.

However, Rogoff (1990) predominantly focuses on participation and apprenticeship as models for learning. Her theories document children's participation with parents and peers as a process of guided participation which involves building bridges through a collaborative approach to learning (Rogoff, 1990). She proposes that learning can also be seen as apprenticeship whereby children are apprentices in thinking (ibid). This view of participation and apprenticeship has been developed further in SLT by Lave and Wenger (1991) and later work by Chaiklin and Lave (1996) has focused on practice, looking at the issue of context whereby the social world of activity needs rethinking in relational terms.

Typically, socio-cultural approaches to learning stress that any activity is situated in a collective practice. This is of particular relevance to networked learning and to this thesis, which advocates collaboration and participation as frameworks for learning. Others such as Leontiev (1978) and Engeström (1987) have pursued the same social approaches to look at overall collective activity whereas SLT focuses more on the practices of communities whereby identity is a key feature of the learning process. It is important to present the roots of SLT in the traditions of Vygotsky and social theories of learning in general because, as Fox (1997) argues, the traditional cognitive theory dominates the thinking on learning and the practice of education. These approaches to learning challenge the view of the banking concept of education have provided the historical roots for SLT and Wenger's (1998) CoP work. This work elaborated the ideas of Rogoff and Lave (1984), Lave and Wenger (1991), Lave (1996) and Chaiklin (1996) and moves away from the Vygotskian tradition drawing upon a broader background, including anthropology and aspects of social theory.

This thesis concentrates on the learning processes of leaders of small businesses so it is important to understand how learning has been dealt with in and by organizations. It is beyond the scope of this chapter and thesis in general to provide an exhaustive account of organizational learning. Rather, the focus here is on how knowledge and learning takes place across a group of small business leaders within networked learning. Organizations themselves are seen to possess 'knowledge structures' on the model of the individualist cognitive theory (Lyles and Schwenk, 1992, p.156). However, SLT deals with cognition differently to how it is treated in the learning theories proposed by Vygotsky. SLT is related to Vygotsky's notion of learning

through social development. However, as Hanks (1991, p.14) points out, rather than asking what kinds of cognitive processes and conceptual structures are involved, SLT asks what kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place. Brown et al. (1989, p.39) emphasize the idea of cognitive apprenticeship:

“Cognitive apprenticeship supports learning in a domain by enabling students to acquire, develop and use cognitive tools in authentic domain activity. Learning, both outside and inside school, advances through collaborative social interaction and the social construction of knowledge.”

Lave and Wenger (1991) outline a comprehensive account of learning in their book *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. With Lave’s background in anthropology this influence and approach to the study of situated learning comes through in the context of five apprenticeships: Yucatec midwives; Vai and Gola tailors; naval quartermasters; meat cutters; and non-drinking alcoholics. The key tenet of SLT is that of legitimate peripheral participation originally presented by Lave and Wenger (1991) which shows how newcomers move toward full participation in the socio-cultural practices of a community as presented through these five case studies. An overview of legitimate peripheral participation is given in section 4.5.

The crux of Lave and Wenger’s argument for a SLT lies in the significance of shifting the analytic focus from the individual as learner to learning as participation in the social world (1991, p. 43). For them the departure from other social theories of learning such as Vygotsky’s is that the concept of cognitive process of learning shifts to a theory of learning as a dimension of social practice which for them is a more-encompassing view of social practice (ibid, p. 43). Addressing learning through cognitive acquisition in relation to SLT, Lave (1996, p.8) says:

“...the idea of learning as cognitive acquisition – whether of facts, knowledge, problem-solving strategies, or meta cognitive skills – seems to dissolve when learning is conceived of as a construction of present versions of past experience for several persons acting together.”

The premise is of learning through participation in social, situated activity rather than its acquisition from a more knowledgeable source. However, SLT does not as Lave (1996) shows amend the traditional cognitive theory by simply examining the social dimension within formal education contexts. She states:

“It is not enough to say that some designated cognitive theory of learning could be amended by adding a theory of ‘situation’ for this raises crucial questions about the compatibility of particular theories” (Lave, 1996, p.7).

SLT is a heuristic, a way of understanding learning in practice. For Lave and Wenger, learning is an aspect of social practice:

“[it] involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to specific activities, but a relation to social communities – it implies becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person” (1991, p. 53).

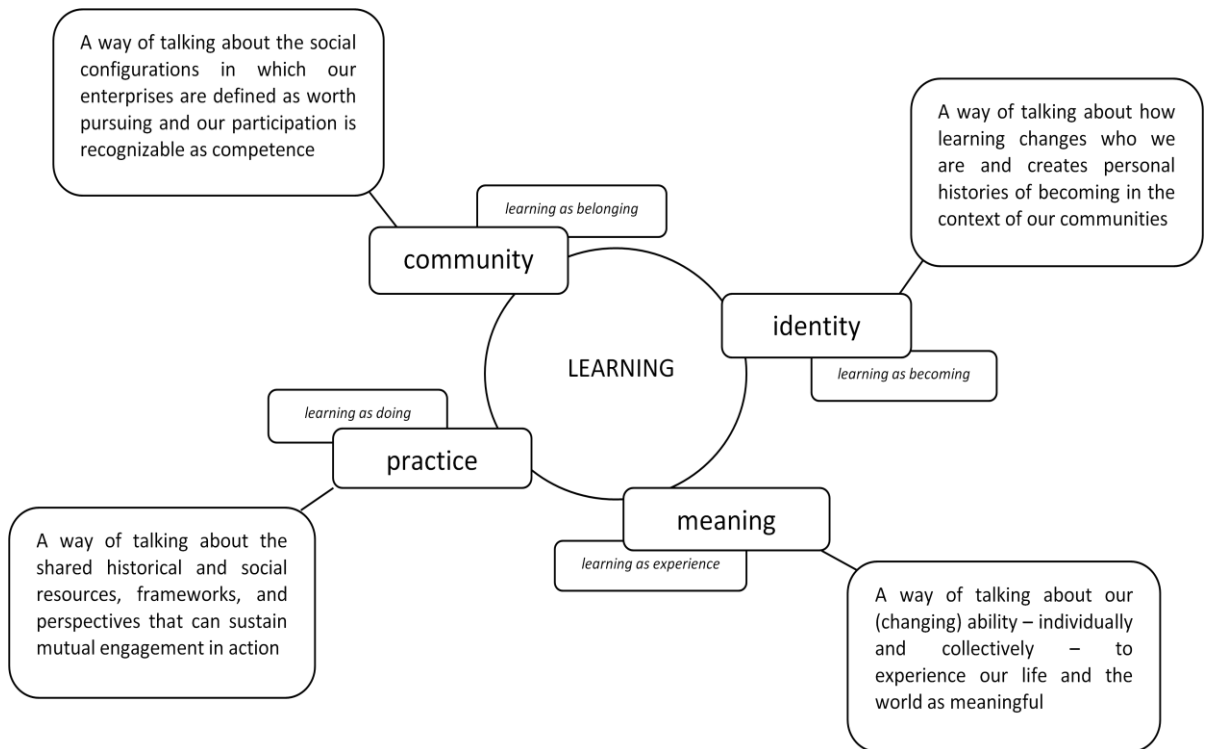
They argue that this participation suggests a very explicit focus on the person as a member of a socio-cultural community. The focus on knowing is as an activity “as person-in-the-world” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.52). For Lave and Wenger learning is an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice. Accordingly, theory becomes practice. SLT is part of a social theory of learning that argues that learning is achieved through participation with other people, in a social context. It rejects the view that knowledge is out there, something that can be delivered from a knowledgeable source to someone lacking that information (see Gherardi, 1995; Gherardi et al., 1998). Gherardi et al. (1998, p.277) strongly argue that if one applies a social perspective to learning, attention shifts from the processing of information and the modifying of cognitive structure to the processes of participation and interaction that provide and sustain the proper context for learning. Further, they argue against learning as an individual phenomenon, but see it as one which involves the whole community. A social view of learning is dominated by, as well as a product of, engagement with social activities. For Gherardi et al. (1998) learning is not conceived as a way of coming to know the world, but as a way of becoming part of the social world:

“Learning is the primary way to engage with others in an ongoing practice, it is what enables actors to modify their relations to others while contributing to the shared activity” (p. 276).

Engaging with others in ongoing practice is also bound up with identity, which I draw upon in chapter 8 to show how identities shift with increased participation in a CoP.

### **4.3 Communities of Practice**

Wenger (1998) presents a social theory of learning which develops the themes of practice and identity as discussed in his earlier work with Lave (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Figure 3 below outlines Wenger’s proposal along with his explanations of the different components which I have grouped and added to his original diagram. To paraphrase Wenger (1998, p 4-6) ‘community’ is a way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and participation is recognizable as competence; ‘identity’ is a way of talking about how learning changes who we are as social beings within a community; ‘meaning’ is a way of talking about our ability to experience life and the world as meaningful and practice is a way of talking about the community’s shared resources. Wenger notes that the primary focus of this theory is on learning as social participation and being active participants in the practice of social communities constructs identities in relation to them. According to Wenger’s argument these four components are deeply interconnected and mutually defining. He notes that any of the four could be placed in the centre and switched with learning and the figure would still make sense. For him the concept of CoP is really a point of entry into a broader conceptual framework which analytically integrates these four components. He argues that a social theory of learning must integrate these components in order to characterize social participation as a process of learning and knowing. The main point for Wenger (1998) is that learning is bound to (or cannot be separated from) the four components.



**Figure 3: Components of a social theory of learning: an initial inventory adapted from Wenger (1998, p.5)**

Wenger (1998, p.9) calls for our attention to turn to our conception of learning, more than learning itself. He argues that conceptions of learning are bound up with classroom settings, exams and cognitive teaching styles. Eckert et al. (1997) acknowledge that learning is a basic and ubiquitous human activity but an important aspect of SLT is, as the name suggests, the notion of situated activity. For Lave and Wenger (1991) there is no activity that is not situated. Rather than receiving a body of factual knowledge about the world, the “agent, activity, and the world mutually constitute each other” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.33). However, Lave and Wenger point out that:

“...learning is not merely situated in practice – as if it were some independently reifiable process that just happened to be located somewhere; learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world” (ibid, p. 35).

For SLT learning takes place in situated activity, within communities in which the learners participate. The communities are presented as CoPs (Lave and Wenger, 1991, Wenger, 1998) - communities of practitioners where newcomers enter and attempt to acquire the socio-cultural practices of the community. Lave and Wenger's notion of a CoP is based on a social theory of learning where practices reflect the pursuit of enterprises which are the property of a kind of community created over time (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). They involve people who interact and develop relationships that enable them to address problems and share knowledge (Wenger, 2004). The CoP approach focuses on the social interactive dimensions of situated learning (Roberts, 2006). Wenger (1998, p.4) introduces CoP theory as a 'new' social learning theory that is centred around social participation, being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities.

Social participation is a key feature of a CoP. Wenger (1998) argues that participation is enabled by the act of reification. Reification is the process through which meanings are abstracted from everyday experience. As such a social identity is conferred through shared practice when people who have a common interest collaborate over time. Through reification labels may be attached to common experiences and artefacts created. Wenger (1998, p.6) states that CoPs are an integral part of our daily lives - we all belong to CoPs, indeed we belong to several at any given time and we have a good idea of who belongs to our CoP and why. A CoP has different defining features to what Brown and Duguid (2001a) term 'networks of practice', which refers to the overall set of various types of informal, emergent social networks that facilitate learning and knowledge sharing between individuals conducting practice-related tasks. Brown and Duguid (2000) propose that CoPs are:

“...relatively tight-knit groups of people who know each other and work directly. They are usually face-to-face communities that continually negotiate with, communicate with, and coordinate with each other directly in the course of work” (p.143).

A network of practice differs from a CoP in that relations among network members are significantly looser (Brown and Duguid, 2000). As such there is little reciprocity

across a network of practice, with co-ordination between members taking place through means such as newsletters or bulletin boards (Brown and Duguid, 2000, p. 142). The individuals in a CoP would typically interact in face-to-face situations and would be linked by strong ties. Networks of practice on the other hand are linked by weak ties (Brown and Duguid, 2001b).

Wenger (1998, p. 74) argues that CoP is not a synonym for group, team or network. It is the mutual engagement of membership that defines the community and whatever it takes to make mutual engagement possible is an essential component of any practice. Similarly, Swan et al. (2002, p.480) argue that professions are not the same as CoPs as they are bounded by formal institutions and governance mechanisms that control membership. Wenger (1998) presents three 'dimensions' that give coherence to a CoP: mutual engagement; joint enterprise; and shared repertoire. He argues that a CoP enters the experience of participants through their engagement with these three dimensions. Although he states: "[these] need not be the focus of explicit attention to create a context for the negotiation of meaning" (Wenger, 1998, p. 84) they have continually been presented by other authors as the key components of a CoP.

The following is paraphrased from Wenger (1998, p. 73-85):

(1) Mutual engagement

Wenger describes mutual engagement as the source of coherence for the community's participants. Practice resides in a community of people and membership is a matter of mutual engagement and the term is not a synonym for group, team or network. This mutual engagement requires work or 'community maintenance' which creates relationships among people.

(2) Joint enterprise

The joint enterprise of a community involves organizing around a particular area of knowledge and activity. This gives members a sense of joint enterprise and identity. Members understand the joint enterprise well enough to contribute to, and be held accountable for it. Members of the CoP align their engagement with the joint



enterprise, becoming accountable to one another for each other's engagement. If mutual engagement is sustained over time in the pursuit of the joint enterprise, the CoP can be thought of as a practice or shared histories of learning.

### (3) Shared repertoire

The shared repertoire is the set of resources that allow for the engagement of the practice of the CoP. For a CoP to function it needs to generate and appropriate a shared repertoire of ideas, commitments and memories. The repertoire of a community of practice includes routines, words, tools, stories and concepts that have become part of the community's practice. This shared repertoire contributes to the continual development and maintenance of the CoP.

These three components are used in the data analysis to explore the learning processes within a networked learning CoP. The CoP under investigation is made up of small business leaders. The concept of CoPs has attracted much interest in organization studies, educational research and is gaining interest in networked learning. It is the debates within organizational learning that I am interested in here. Swan et al. (2002) suggest that the notion of CoP has achieved prominence in the context of wider debates on knowledge, learning and innovation in organizations, highlighting the extent to which knowledge and learning are situated in work practices. Brown and Duguid (1991) use CoPs to look at innovation and others look to it to explain innovative capacity within organizations and intellectual capital (Lesser and Everest, 2001). Organizational researchers have also used CoP in their work (see for example, Orr, 1996; Blackler, 1995; Blackler and McDonald, 2000). Roberts (2006) recognises that the CoP approach has become increasingly influential within management literature and practice. Similarly, Smith (2003) notes that CoP ideas have been picked-up within organizational development circles which, in the 1990s, had a growing interest in 'the learning organization'. For Smith (2003) the reason that the apprenticeship model was appealing was because it made for a strong set of connections with important traditions of thinking about training and development within organizations. Wenger (1998) suggests that in placing the focus on learning the CoP approach can be beneficial to organizations as:

“...it means that learning is an issue of sustaining the interconnected communities of practice through which an organization knows what it knows and thus becomes effective and valuable as an organization” (p.8.)

Unlike Wenger’s above proposal (of how CoP can benefit the individual organization which can sustain interconnected CoPs), this study seeks to understand how CoP can be used across multiple (small) organizations. It is useful therefore to look at how CoP theory deals with the construction of CoPs, which I now go on to address.

#### **4.4 Bringing a learning community into being**

*“Where there is practice, there is community”* (Plaskoff, 2003, p.166).

This point by Plaskoff is preceded with a question on whether a CoP can be created. He answers this with a purely semantic distinction by saying CoPs cannot be created (as this implies they come from nothing) but they can be built. Two key components of CoPs are: (1) they are seen to emerge among groups of individuals who have similar work-related activities and interests, and; (2) that the members join the CoP voluntarily (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Lesser and Everest, 2001). Originally, Lave and Wenger (1991) argued that CoPs could not be purposefully formed by organizations, rather, they emerged spontaneously. However, later debates which are located in organizational learning proposed that CoPs can indeed be cultivated (see Wenger and Snyder, 2000; Wenger et al., 2002; Saint-Onge and Wallace, 2003). Wenger et al. (2002) address this in their book *Cultivating Communities of Practice* and outline the following seven principles which embody the authors’ understanding of how elements of design work together in community design:

1. Design for evolution.
2. Open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives.
3. Invite different levels of participation.
4. Develop both public and private community spaces.
5. Focus on value.
6. Combine familiarity and excitement.

## 7. Create a rhythm for the community.

Wenger et al. (2002, p. 51)

The book is an attempt by the authors to move theory to practice (i.e. to the organization) and as such they focus on the cultivation of CoPs as a potential managerial tool which organizations can use for competitive advantage. The focus is shifted from the learning of the individual towards a tool for organizations to manage 'knowledge workers'. Although this is a departure from the earlier work on CoP a key component is still that of self-selection and voluntary participation within a CoP. The three original 'dimensions' of a CoP as discussed above (mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire) are replaced with domain, community and practice. Wenger et al. (2002, p.27-29) characterise these as follows:

- The *domain* creates the common ground (i.e. the minimal competence that differentiates members from non-members) and outlines the boundaries that enable members to decide what is worth sharing and how to present their ideas.
- The *community* creates the social structure that facilitates learning through interactions and relationships with others.
- The *practice* is a set of shared repertoires of resources that include documents, ideas, experiences, information, and ways of addressing recurring problems. In essence, the practice is the specific knowledge the community shares, develops, and maintains.

Together these elements can optimise the creation and dissemination of knowledge for the benefit of the organization. These elements work well in a mature CoP (Wenger et al., 2002) but it is less clear how they work when a CoP is being cultivated. Elsewhere, Wenger and Snyder (2000, p. 143) say that although CoPs are fundamentally informal and self-organizing, they benefit from cultivation. They suggest managers should identify potential CoPs that will enhance the company's strategic capabilities and provide the infrastructure that will support such communities. Similarly, Brown and Duguid (2001b, p.58) suggest organizations can seek to structure spontaneity by structuring fragmented practice across their organization. This builds on their earlier work, in which learning is an integral feature

of the practical “intricacies” of work (Brown and Duguid, 1991).<sup>31</sup> CoPs can then be seen as a management tool. However, Swan et al. (2002) suggest that if the notion of CoPs is used this way then managers have little authority to facilitate the control of the professional groups which have been created. What is clear in the debates around the cultivation of CoPs is the role of a leader. Wenger and Snyder (2000) say when designing itself, a community should look at leadership as CoPs depend on internal leadership. Further, Wenger says that CoPs should enable the leaders to play their role as this is a way to help the community develop (Wenger, 2000a, p.231).

The debates surrounding CoP as a managerial tool focus on “growing communities of practice from seed” (Wenger and Snyder, 2000, p. 143). This is presented as a managerial paradox by Wenger and Snyder (2000) who get round the question of whether CoPs can be constructed by arguing that, like a garden, they benefit from cultivation. For Wenger and Snyder (2000) members of a CoP establish their own leadership. What is not addressed here is whether a leader can construct a CoP. More recently, Wenger (2008) has explored the role of leadership and sponsorship of CoPs arguing that CoPs are complicated social systems that benefit from leadership that nurtures them and sponsorship that gives them legitimacy (see also Wenger et al., 2009).

Although the concept of CoP came from theories of learning, as discussed its evolution has seen its deployment as a management tool for organizational competitiveness. Brown and Duguid (2001b, p.58) argue that managers can encourage alignments of changing practices between communities, thereby assisting the transfer of knowledge across the organization. However, there is little written on the cultivation of CoPs across organizations (rather than across one organization). There are studies within the entrepreneurship literature such as BarNir and Smith’s (2002) work on inter-firm alliances in the small business sphere that draw upon network theory to show the positive impact of inter-firm alliances. Similarly, there are debates which focus on innovation and multi-organizational working for competitive advantage and the development of innovations (see Brown and Duguid, 2002).

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<sup>31</sup> Contu and Wilmot (2003) state that Brown and Duguid’s (1991) paper is by far the most frequently cited article on situated learning in the management and organizations literature, and it is very prominent within the education literature too.

However, these literatures are outside the scope of the debates on CoPs here. This study is an attempt to fill that gap. Chapter 7 uses CoP theory to show how a learning community of small businesses is constructed. Elsewhere, I have explored the arguments on whether a CoP can be constructed in this way (see Peters, 2009). In this thesis I use the concept of CoP including the role of the leader (or sponsor), to complement the actor-network literature in order to argue that a learning community made up of small businesses can be constructed as a CoP.

I now go on to discuss two main elements of learning within CoP, legitimate peripheral participation and the learning curriculum. Within this I also discuss the circulation of knowledge as this is a key factor in understanding how the members of a CoP learn. After this I present some of the criticisms of the idea of CoPs.

#### **4.5 Learning within the CoP: Legitimate Peripheral Participation**

Legitimate peripheral participation is presented by Lave and Wenger (1991) as a rubric for understanding learning. They use it to characterize the process by which newcomers become included in a CoP looking at relationships of participation rather than a teacher/learner dyad. The newcomers learn from old-timers, increasing their legitimacy within the group and moving from peripheral participation to full participation as they identify more with the CoP in question. Legitimate peripheral participation is defined as:

“...a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artefacts 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).

Lave and Wenger outline five case studies of CoPs to show how legitimate peripheral participation can be explained through an apprenticeship model of newcomers learning from masters (old-timers). The old-timers will have been newcomers once

and will have also had to have learnt the practice which they will now be helping the newcomers to learn. Lave and Wenger note how learners must be legitimate peripheral participants in ongoing practice in order to engage in the CoP, learn from old-timers and develop into full participants (1991, p. 64).

Legitimate peripheral participation is strongly linked to the identity of the members of a CoP seeking to gain fuller participation. Accordingly, the terms newcomers and old-timers are also bound up with the identity each has within the CoP. Writing about schools as learning communities, Eckert et al. (1997) use the CoP approach to argue that individuals learn in the interests of participation in communities that matter to them:

“They learn in order to know how to be productive in the community, and to gain access to valued forms of community participation. Their reward is in seeing their contribution, knowing that others recognize their contribution, and forging an ever changing sense of themselves” (1997, p.2).

This ‘ever changing sense of themselves’ is important in the process of legitimate peripheral participation and learning in general. As members of a CoP achieve fuller participation so their identity shifts from newcomer to old-timer. It is important to note that members seek fuller participation rather than complete participation, which could imply there is a centre. Instead, Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that there is no core or centre. The main purpose of legitimate peripheral participation is to show how members’ identities change as they become fuller participants. Using the examples from the five apprenticeship cases Lave and Wenger (1991) show how newcomers to the practices of midwifery, tailoring, naval quarter-mastery, meat cutting, and non-drinking alcoholism become fuller participants and their identities shift with increasing membership until eventually they become full participants (midwives, tailors and so on). Lave and Wenger (1991, p.105) quote Jordan (1998) who argues: “learning to become a legitimate participant in a community involves learning how to talk (and be silent) in the manner of full participants”. This point, learning how to talk in the manner of full participants, is used within the main argument of chapter 8 whereby I demonstrate how the members of the CoP under study learn how to be

members. This process also involves notions of learning a curriculum which I discuss below. Legitimate peripheral participation is used in the data analysis to highlight the importance of the processes of learning within networked learning. As well as using it as a framework I also present an alternative reading and thus it is important to provide an overview of what legitimate peripheral participation is.

One final point to make in relation to legitimate peripheral participation is to highlight that the literature and debates surrounding learning within CoPs have not looked at CoPs where there are no old-timers as such. Discussions surrounding CoP as a management tool where CoPs are cultivated in organizations show that these CoPs do not follow the traditions of early CoP theory. Accordingly, they may not have old-timers for newcomers to learn from in the apprenticeship sense. These discussions do not overtly address what happens in terms of newcomers gaining fuller membership through legitimate peripheral participation. This is a key area of CoP theory that I contribute to in my proposal of a constructed CoP in chapter 7. In chapter 8 I also present the concept of ‘enabler’ as an alternative to old-timer.

#### **4.6 Learning within the CoP: practice as curriculum**

In learning the practices of a community, Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 93) propose that a potential “curriculum” is created. Lave and Wenger use the term “curriculum” in the broadest sense of that which may be learned by newcomers with legitimate peripheral access. They go on to distinguish between a learning curriculum and a teaching curriculum. A learning curriculum consists of a field of learning resources in everyday practice viewed from the perspective of learners. It evolves out of participation in a specific CoP and is characteristic of a community. Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 100) suggest that:

“...rather than learning by replicating performances of others or by acquiring knowledge transmitted in instruction, we suggest that learning occurs through centripetal participation in the learning curriculum of the ambient community.”

A teaching curriculum, by contrast, is constructed for the instruction of newcomers (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 97). Wenger (1998) continues this idea and uses the term 'living curriculum' to describe how an apprentice learns through a CoP. The living curriculum differentiates from a taught curriculum (the teaching curriculum) which lays more emphasis on an external view of 'knowing'. Taking this a step further Gherardi et al. (1998) are credited with the notion of the situated curriculum. Writing about the construction industry in Italy they develop the concept of the situated curriculum to understand the social process by which novices become proficient in the practical activities within an organization. The situated curriculum is related to novices learning the practices of a specific job. They address the learning, teaching and situated curriculum by stating:

“...the learning curriculum includes all the learning opportunities offered to individuals pursuing the same occupation in their work careers. These opportunities include the teaching curriculum during the schooling phase, the situated curriculum of the community (or communities) to which they belong during their occupational careers, and all other formal and informal occasions of learning offered in the day-to-day lives of organizations” (Gherardi et al., 1998, p. 280).

Lave and Wenger's (1991) learning curriculum, according to Gherardi et al., would include the situated curriculum. Similarly, the situated curriculum has similarities with the shared repertoire presented by Wenger (1998) which:

“...includes routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence, and which have become part of its practice” (p. 83).

The situated curriculum resonates with Contu and Wilmot's (2003, p. 285) comments on how a competent member of a CoP is one who demonstrates the ability to “read” the local context and act in ways that are recognized and valued by other members of the immediate CoP. The situated curriculum plays an important role in the data analysis specifically when I ask how SME leaders learn within networked learning.



Chapter 8 is dedicated to exploring this. I now provide a brief overview of the key debates around knowledge management and the free flow of ideas within CoP.

#### **4.7 Knowledge management and the free flow of ideas**

Roberts (2006) notes that CoP is still an evolving approach to knowledge management. She argues that:

“Over the coming years, as communities of practice are applied and studied in an increasing number of organizational contexts, we will gain a deeper understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the approach” (p.637).

Applying CoP to organizational learning, Wenger (2004) comments that the field has come to realize the importance of CoPs as the social fabric of knowledge. Wenger argues: “If knowledge is a strategic asset, then it has to be managed like any critical organizational asset. It is too important to be left to chance” (2004, p.1). Further he suggests that the first step in knowledge management is to translate the strategy of the organization into a set of domains of knowledge (Wenger, 2004, p.3). Arguably this statement is of more relevance to larger organizations as small businesses notoriously lack official strategies (see Churchill and Lewis, 1983; Matlay, 2003). That is not to say that Wenger’s argument of knowledge as an organizational asset does not apply to small businesses, rather it is that small businesses typically lack the resources to be able to use CoP as a management tool. This is also a debate this thesis seeks to contribute to. Wenger (2004) continues by stressing that knowledge is not held by the individual within an organization and because CoPs are social structures that focus on knowledge they can enable the management of knowledge to be placed in the hands of practitioners. Adding to this, Wenger argues that CoPs are the cornerstones of knowledge management (2004, p. 2). Similarly, Brown and Duguid (2001a) argue that CoPs can be significant repositories for the development, maintenance and reproduction of knowledge. They recognise that the community’s knowledge is shared but not equally across the community (ibid, p.202). Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that a CoP is an intrinsic condition of the existence of knowledge. The interaction between people within a CoP creates the conditions of the free flow of

ideas (Brown and Duguid, 1991) which serves to strengthen the CoP. For Lave and Wenger, (1991, p.93): “the effectiveness of the circulation of information among peers suggests that engaging in practice, rather than being its object, may well be a *condition* for the effectiveness of learning” (emphasis in the original). Elsewhere, Wenger and Snyder (2000) stress that the strength of CoPs is self-perpetuating:

“As they generate knowledge, they reinforce and renew themselves. That’s why communities of practice give you not only the golden eggs but also the goose that lays them. The farmer killed the goose to get all the gold and ended up losing both; the challenge for organizations is to appreciate the goose and to understand how to keep it alive and productive” (p.143).

This self-perpetuating action of CoPs can be seen in Orr’s (1990, 1996) accounts of photocopier technicians who create knowledge and reinforce their own identities through the exchange of war stories which serve as a vehicle of what he calls community memory.

The circulation of knowledge and the environment needed to foster the free flow of ideas are seen then to be important elements of a CoP. The flows of knowledge are seen as inextricably linked to social relations developed through shared practice (Swan et al., 2002, p.479). However, as discussed above the focus is normally on a single organization. The discussions on the circulation of knowledge and the free flow of ideas do not themselves flow into considerations of multi-organizational CoPs, let alone ones that might be made up of small businesses. It is here that I feel I can contribute to the understanding of knowledge circulation within CoPs made up of SMEs. Additionally, Edwards (2005) says that it is not clear how the metaphor of CoP deals with learning something new, arguing: “It provides a compelling account of learning as socialization into existing beliefs, values and practices, but does not offer an account of how new knowledge is produced” (p.57). This is also an area this study can contribute to.

I now outline some of the criticisms pertaining to the CoP approach in relation to organizations and organizational learning.

## **4.8 Criticisms and limitations of CoP in relation to this study**

CoP has been used by a wide variety of disciplines and it is not without its critics. Certainly there are limitations which the main authors themselves deal with and invite others to push the boundaries of the theory (see Wenger, 2010). As CoP theory has evolved there has been an increasing number of scholars within management disciplines who critique the theory, which goes beyond the scope of this literature review and thesis (see for example, Contu and Willmott, 2003; Fox, 2000; Handley et al., 2006; Mutch, 2003). I will cover the following criticisms of the CoP approach which I feel are relevant to this study: conceptualising “community”; addressing power and the periphery; the limitations in relation to SMEs and multi-organizational CoPs.

### **4.8.1 Conceptualising “community”**

The focus of community in CoP theory has been criticised because of the connotations it brings with it (see Contu and Willmott, 2003; Handley et al., 2006; Lindkvist, 2005). Fox (2005) argues that ‘community’ invokes nostalgia which in turn brings with it a heavy burden as we try to make this idea from the past real in our modern lives. Although Fox draws upon ANT to show how community can be seen as a ‘network effect’ his critique can be applied to CoP theory whereby CoPs can be seen to strive for the ‘community’ that Fox critiques. Wenger (1998) discusses the connotations that the term community brings with it. He draws upon Williams (1976) who argues that in social discourse, the term ‘community’, is consistently used with positive connotations (Wenger, 1998, p. 288). Subsequently, Wenger et al. (2002) looked at what they referred to as the ‘downside’ of CoPs arguing that:

“[the] very qualities that make a community an ideal structure for learning – a shared perspective on a domain, trust, a communal identity, longstanding relationships, an established practice – are the same qualities that can hold it hostage to its history and its achievements” (p. 141).

Hodgson and Reynolds (2010, p. 595) point out that the discourse of ‘community’ carries with it a number of attractive features including solidarity, a sense of belonging, shared responsibility and mutual support. Arguably, one of the ingredients for nurturing these features of a community is trust. Trust within communities and CoP theory is underexplored and I draw upon notions of trust in chapter 7 where I propose that trust is needed to help to construct a networked learning CoP. Returning to the connotations that ‘community’ brings with it, Contu and Wilmot (2003, p.287) argue that Lave and Wenger’s use of ‘community’ is complicit in reproduction and legitimation of hegemonic notions such as ‘family’, ‘team’ and partnership. They argue that these are unreflexive invocations and point to the danger of assuming a consensus in CoPs. Instead, they urge us to focus on *practice* within the CoP approach. Wenger (2008) talks about how CoP theory is taking the “practice turn” where it is becoming more focused on practice as opposed to “community”. Practice then becomes the theoretical underpinning of the CoP (Wenger, 2008). I argue that combining CoP with ANT in the context of this study contributes to the practice debates, the practice in this instance being the learning within a CoP of SME leaders.

Looking at community from another perspective, in the same article Contu and Wilmot (2003) argue that not all communities are developed with a shared purpose to address a problem or concern. In relation to organizational learning they argue that minimal attention has been paid to how learning practices are conditioned by history, power, and language and that not all CoPs are consensual or unified (Contu and Wilmot, 2003, p. 293). Similarly, Handley et al. (2006, p. 642) state that individuals bring their personal histories to the community which could conflict with those of the community. Wenger’s (1998) original work did go some way to addressing this by acknowledging the possibility of conflict but other authors have argued that the approach needs more attention in relation to power and conflict which I touch upon below.

The final point I want to bring in here on critiques surrounding the concept of ‘community’ is that of using CoP as a management tool. Li et al. (2009, p. 5) argue that the term ‘community’ could lead people to think that any group structure can be regarded as a CoP, which was not Wenger’s intent. Practitioners using the CoP approach for the benefit of their organizations should do so reflexively with awareness

that CoPs should not be over engineered (Wenger and Snyder, 2000) or told how to behave (Wenger, 2008).

#### **4.8.2 Addressing power and the periphery**

CoP theory is often criticised for how it deals with power relations. It is not the intention here to discuss power at great length; other authors have given more comprehensive accounts (see Contu and Wilmot, 2002, 2003; Fox, 2000, 2005; Swan et al., 2002). More so the purpose here is to highlight the limitations of the CoP approach in relation to power and the notion of the boundary or periphery, which is an aspect of the theory this study seeks to contribute to.

The original writings on SLT and CoP do address power, for example Lave and Wenger (1991, p.36) recognise that legitimate peripherality is a complex notion that involves relations of power and how it can be a source of power or powerlessness. Debates on power within CoP coupled with those focused on the boundaries of CoPs have relevance to this study. Roberts (2006 p. 626) states that an understanding of the power dynamics of CoPs is essential to the development of a full understanding of knowledge creation and dissemination. The role of the periphery is an important issue. Lave and Wenger (1991, p.117) argue that “constructively naïve” perspectives or questions can be developed through legitimate peripheral participation which they see as an asset to exploited. In terms of power and legitimate peripheral participation, Roberts (2006, p.627) notes that Lave and Wenger (1991) do note the significance of power in shaping the legitimacy of peripherality and participation, but she argues:

“...they fail to explore the implications of the distribution of power when discussing their case studies of communities of practice, and considerations of power are absent or relegated to footnotes in Wenger’s (1998, 2000) later work” (p. 627).

Elsewhere, power is discussed from the perspective of CoP members who choose not to participate. For example, Hodges (1998) talks of non-participation and the dis-identification of someone who rejects the identity connected with the practice. Similarly, Handley et al. (2006, p. 643-4) quote Lave (2004) who challenged the strict

dichotomy between ‘periphery’ and ‘core/full’ by proposing that participation may involve learning trajectories which do not lead to an idealized ‘full’ participation. In relation to networked learning Ferreday and Hodgson (2008) have explored the ‘dark side’ of participation in learning in which a form of tyranny emerges as an extreme manifestation of collaborative participation which instead of having a liberating effect, reinforces a form of oppression and control.

Wenger notes that peripheries and boundaries are woven together, “because of peripheries you experience boundaries, and because of boundaries you experience peripheries” (Wenger, 1998, p.120). I use the two terms interchangeably as legitimate peripheral participation is itself the boundary edge of the community. Wenger (2000b, p. 11) states that boundaries are not normally formal, but in relation to this study I argue that in a constructed CoP they can be seen to be formal. In the data analysis I explore the role of the periphery within the CoP in this study and what this means for the trajectory of the CoP members’ learning.

Wenger (2000a, p.234) argues that boundary processes are crucial to the coherent function of social learning systems. He says that people, artefacts and interactions serve as bridges which can weave CoPs more tightly together. Others have also looked at the impact such bridges have on different communities, for example Star and Griesemer (1989, p. 393) propose the notion of ‘boundary objects’ which “are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites.” Whilst the literature looks at the importance of the periphery/boundary in learning the practices of the CoP, I agree with Handley et al. (2006) who say an analysis of situated learning requires an understanding of what happens beyond CoPs. Wenger (2000b, p. 11) rightly notes that CoPs do not exist in isolation. Their effectiveness is not a matter of their internal development alone, but also a matter of how well they connect with other communities and constituencies inside and outside the organization. Similarly, Roberts (2006, p. 635) suggests that business organizations could leverage their knowledge capacities by harnessing CoPs that are both within and *beyond* their organizational boundaries (emphasis added). However, much of this discussion on the effectiveness of the CoP depends on how connected it is to other parts of the organization where something related to their area is taking place

(Wenger, 2000b, p. 16). I argue that in a multi-organizational CoP the effectiveness relies on how well the learning is situated back into each of the organizations. This factor is not considered in the literature.

This study seeks to understand the effectiveness of the learning community under investigation in how well connected it is to areas outside, i.e. within the organizations that make up the very learning community. I argue in the data analysis chapters that the boundaries of the CoP lay an important role in the learning of the CoP itself. Wenger (2000b, p. 11) notes that boundaries have negative connotations and as noted above there are criticisms of CoP theory for not having explored the power dynamics fully. However, this study shows that multi-organizational CoPs can be empowering as the knowledge and learning have a trajectory that is located within and beyond the periphery of the CoP under question. Additionally, I take Lave and Wenger's (1991) view of the importance of the periphery for learning and expand on it, looking at the periphery of the CoP in this study and the importance of where the learning within the CoP is taken (situated into another context) and also how other people who are on the periphery but do not seek to be part of the CoP influence the learning of the CoP.

#### **4.8.3 CoP theory is limited in relation to SMEs and multi-organizational CoPs**

CoP theory tends to focus on large organizations (see Wenger, 1998) or learning a particular practice (see Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2000a). SMEs are largely missing from the literature. Roberts (2006) is one of the few authors on CoP to comment on this. She asks whether SMEs are able to spare the necessary resources to cultivate CoPs:

“While very small and large organizations can use communities of practice to encourage knowledge creation and sharing, due to resource limitations small and medium sized firms may be less able to exploit these methods of knowledge management” (Roberts, 2006, p. 635).

Even with this acknowledgment Roberts' (2006 p. 626) claim that managers are increasingly seeking to develop and support CoPs as part of their knowledge management strategies does not necessarily apply to SMEs. Small businesses

notoriously grapple with limited resources and are renowned for not having official strategies. Arguably, SMEs are not known for having explicit knowledge management strategies, certainly they are not smaller versions of their larger counterparts. Devins et al. (2005) argue that it is well recognised that SMEs extend beyond the traditional 'nine to five' structure with the owner-manager taking on many roles. Additionally, small businesses have been conceptualised as learning organizations operating within an interdependent network of others including family members, friends, professional bodies and other stakeholders (Gibb, 1997). This extended network may influence CoPs within SMEs (or SMEs as CoPs) differently to how other networks may affect CoPs within larger organizations. In this thesis I argue that leaders of SMEs can benefit from being part of a CoP of other SMEs leaders in order to harness the knowledge of this collective as a strategic asset that can be applied (and therefore situated) back into their own organizations.

The critiques of CoPs such as those of Roberts (2006) stem from an organizational learning perspective. In chapter 7, I propose that LEAD can be conceived of as a CoP made up of multiple small business leaders. The organizational learning is across organizations as opposed to within one organization. It is here that CoP theory in organizational learning could benefit from widening its perspective. In relation to the discussions on CoP as a management tool for organizational learning the focus tends to be on a particular organization. Kimble and Hildreth (2004) actually question whether CoPs are appropriate for a business setting, arguing that the CoP's interests may not be aligned with those of the organization and "because they are self-managed and self directed, their contribution to the organization will always be uncertain" (ibid, p. 5). However, this argument still applies to 'the' organization. I argue that CoP theory would benefit from looking at situations whereby multiple organizations are involved in a CoP. Wenger (2000a) does present a case of cross-disciplinary projects but in general the literature falls short of looking at multi-organizational CoPs. This study seeks to understand how a multi-organizational CoP made up of SME leaders learns and in turn, how that learning benefits each of the individual organizations which constitute the CoP. Just as Edwards (2005) says the metaphor of CoP is unclear in how it deals with learning something new, I would add to this that the literature does not adequately address how new knowledge is created and circulated between multi-organizational CoPs. This is an area this study can contribute to.



## **4.9 Summary and concluding comments**

This chapter has provided an overview of the key aspects of SLT and CoP theory in relation to this study. CoP theory sits within an approach to learning that challenges traditional cognitive approaches and stems from SLT which itself has antecedents in social theories of learning. This chapter has identified and presented a number of areas within the CoP approach that this study seeks to make a contribution to. The main critiques in relation to this research are how CoP tends to deal with larger organizations and also a single context. Therefore this study seeks to add to the debates to show how CoP theory is relevant to SMEs and how new knowledge is created and circulated within a CoP made up of multiple organizations (SMEs). Additionally, the study adds to our understanding of how to use CoP as a managerial tool in terms of how to construct a CoP. Networked learning is the context of this study and debates pertaining to CoP in this field is elaborated in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **NETWORKED LEARNING AND SMEs**

#### CHAPTER 5:

#### NETWORKED LEARNING AND SMEs

- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 What is networked learning?
- 5.3 Learning communities and CoPs in networked learning
- 5.4 Critiques of collaboration and community in networked learning
- 5.5 Alienation in networked learning
- 5.6 Constructing networked learning CoPs
- 5.7 Reflection and reflexivity within networked learning
- 5.8 SMEs, networked learning and higher education
- 5.9 Summary

### **5.1 Introduction**

This thesis asks: “how and where do SME leaders learn within networked learning?” It is also interested in understanding how a networked learning community is constructed. The previous two literature reviews outlined the theoretical frameworks of ANT and SLT and CoP theory which are used to analyse the data in order to answer these research questions. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive overview of the debates surrounding networked learning that provide the context for the thesis. Networked learning is the main field in which this thesis makes a contribution and it is therefore important to highlight the areas within networked learning that are both relevant and would benefit from this empirical research.

Using the theoretical frameworks of ANT, SLT and CoP this thesis analyses a constructed learning community which is conceptualised as both an actor-network and

a CoP. Hodgson (2009, p. 131) notes that the terms ‘learning community’ and ‘communities of practice’ are used interchangeably as metaphors for describing the ideas and intentions of collaborative learning approaches. For the purpose of this chapter I use the more generic term of the ‘learning community’ to talk about learners within networked learning (although I will be addressing how the two terms differ). The context of this thesis is a networked learning programme made up of leaders of small businesses but there is little written within the networked learning literature on SMEs. We can turn to literature on ICT and business and even government policies that highlight the benefits that ICT can bring to SMEs but there is a gap between showing what benefit ICTs generally can bring to SMEs and what ICTs in the form of networked learning could afford this sector. This is the main area which this thesis aims to contribute to and chapter 10 outlines a set of networked learning principles for SME learning communities. To this end it is hoped that one outcome could be that this thesis contributes to policy formation around the use of ICT within networked learning as a very real opportunity to facilitate leadership development in SMEs. Wenger et al. (2009, p. 21) note: “Technology has changed how we think about communities, and communities have changed our uses of technology”. This chapter and thesis in general shows how networked learning can contribute to how we think about communities and how networked learning communities help us to think about the role of technologies for learning.

My research is concerned with how SME leaders learn and how to construct learning environments which enable this community to have a real impact back in their own businesses. I am keen to explore how networked learning using technology should not replace sound pedagogy in relation to the learning experience. The debates I critically analyse here are relevant to this. This chapter begins with an overview of the definition of networked learning I am working with. I then look at the different approaches taken towards the concepts of learning communities and CoPs in networked learning. Given that the view of networked learning I am drawing upon views learning as a social process I explore the debates surrounding collaboration and connectivity and also alienation in networked learning. One of the key areas of focus in this thesis is that of constructing a learning community within networked learning, with attention on whether a CoP can be constructed, with networked learning as the context or environment for this construction. As such I look at the discussions

relevant to the idea of constructing networked learning CoPs where I also propose the importance of reflection and reflexivity within networked learning.

Finally, I link the networked learning literature to the main context of the study; SME leaders. I show how debates have not connected with work on the importance of ICTs in the SME sector with work on HE and knowledge exchange initiatives that support SMEs. The aim here is to show how networked learning could have a real impact on SMEs and that as educators it is important that we think critically and reflexively about pedagogies in networked learning relevant for such groups.

I begin by outlining the definition of networked learning that is used throughout this thesis.

## **5.2 What is networked learning?**

In 2002 a group of academics gathered at a dissemination event to launch the *E-quality in e-learning Manifesto*. The authors state this was based on their shared deliberation, practitioner research and collective experience to envisage HE where access and connectivity are encouraged and where lifelong learning is truly and effectively supported (E-Quality Network, 2002, p.3). Although the authors have recently recommended that this manifesto be revisited, much of the document remains relevant and topical, certainly it provides a comprehensive overview of what networked learning is and how it can be leveraged for collaborative approaches to learning. To this end I will outline the key concepts discussed in this manifesto and show which definition of networked learning I am using within this thesis.

In the original manifesto the definition of Networked E-Learning was as follows:

“Networked e-learning refers to those learning situations and contexts which, through the use of ICT, allow learners to be connected with other people (for example, learners, teachers/tutors, mentors, librarians, technical assistants) and with shared, information rich resources. Networked e-learning also views learners as contributing to

the development of these learning resources and information of various kinds and types” (E-Quality Network, 2002, p.5).

Recently, the same authors noted that the key principles that were captured in this definition and further developed in the manifesto were:

- The use of ICT to connect people and resources
- Learners contributing to the development of learning resources and information of various kinds

(Beaty et al., 2010, p.588)

Beaty et al. (2010) do not feel that the original definition and principles of networked learning should be dramatically changed but they do call for an updated version recognising that this process is fluid. A first step in the direction of updating the definition, they feel, should:

“...not only refer to being a pedagogy based on connectivity and the co-production of knowledge but also one that aspires to support equality of opportunity and include reference to the importance of relational dialogue and critical reflexivity in all of this” (Beaty et al., 2010, p. 589).

The principles of collaboration and the co-construction of knowledge rather than expert and acolyte model (E-Quality Network, 2002, p. 6) underpin networked learning. At the same time Jones (2002) was exploring whether a policy for networked learning could emerge given that networked learning is part of an emergent networked society. Jones points out that the literature surrounding networked learning still reflects technological determinist views that argue social change is a necessary consequence of the application of technology (2002, p. 1).

Essentially, the view of networked learning goes beyond that of just using ICT and is rooted more in the pedagogical aims which seek to connect resources through a collaborative approach to learning. One definition which is widely used to define networked learning, and one which this thesis supports is Goodyear et al's. (2004).

This definition is used to mean a distinctive approach to terms such as e-learning, web-based learning and online learning. Specifically, Goodyear et al. (2004, p.1) define networked learning as:

“...learning in which information and communications technology (ICT) is used to promote connections: between one learner and other learner; between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources.”

The authors highlight however that the use of online materials is not a sufficient characteristic to define networked learning and although examples of networked learning involve interaction with online materials it is the connectivity with resources and people and through participation and collaboration which defines networked learning (ibid, p.2). Taking this point further Goodyear et al. (ibid) state:

“The centrality of human interaction, in our conception of networked learning, carries with it some pedagogical commitment and beliefs about learning. In short, there is no point to networked learning if you do not value learning through co-operation, collaboration, dialog, and/or participation in a community.”

Such approaches are conceptually and theoretically associated with social constructionist and relational views of learning (Hodgson, 2009, p. 127). Before I go on to critically review the key debates on networked learning in relation to this study I will touch upon how the definition of networked learning used here differentiates from other forms of learning which incorporate ICTs.

Networked learning is not synonymous with other forms of computer supported learning traditions but it does share similarities. The main difference is that networked learning draws upon a pedagogy of collaboration and the co-construction of knowledge which is critically discussed below. The approach has antecedents in traditions of distance education. Brower (2003, p.23) presents an overview of three waves of distance education, the first being self-paced and independent study where materials were mailed between the students and their schools; the second wave added

video and audiotapes to “humanize” the process and the third wave allowed for some interaction between students and teachers via e-mail, mail or fax. In these approaches Eastman and Swift argue that the focus was still primarily on teaching (rather than learning), and the interaction was one-directional (Eastman and Swift, 2001, in Brower 2003, p. 23). It is important to look at the approaches of distance education because networked learning grew out of some of the approaches to learning whereby the students are not necessarily co-present. Brower goes on to look at how online learning developed from the distance learning principles and says: “In many cases, the designer of these Internet-based courses tries to create a learning experience as much like the face-to-face classroom experience as possible” (2003, p. 23). This is not unusual and many early internet based courses or learner experiences tried to replicate their physical counterparts (see Arbaugh, 2000 for a discussion of the virtual versus physical classroom).

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has a long history of being used in teaching, particularly in HE (see Dysthe, 2002; Steeples et al., 1996). Hodgson and Reynolds (2005, p.12) recognise that: “Networked learning is closely aligned to CMC, in that it has emerged from and is largely dependent upon it to connect learners with other learners, tutors or resources.” Similarly, e-learning, originally referring to electronic learning although developed into ‘enhanced learning’, was dominated by a view that learners were connected via electronic means. Charlier (2000) defines three types of e-learning environments: (1) the transmission of knowledge, (2) building of individual knowledge and (3) group collaboration to build new knowledge (Charlier, 2000 in Denis et al., 2004). The e-tutor plays a significant role in these environments (Denis et al., 2004), which their involvement could go some way to challenging a technological deterministic approach which Jones (2002, p.1) says is still reflected in the networked learning literature<sup>32</sup>. Jones goes as far as questioning the idea that there is any technological imperative determining the shape of networked learning (ibid). Beaty and Howard (2010) also recognise that although the view of networked learning embodied in the 2002 *E-quality in e-learning Manifesto* supported the co-construction of knowledge, they says that it fore-grounded communication over content. They state:

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<sup>32</sup> Even the term ‘e-tutor’ is loaded with connotations related to technological determinism. In relation to this study I will refer to this role as ‘facilitator’ which covers both physical and online facilitation.

“Emphasis was placed on how those engaged in networked learning were connected by the technology. We put forward the proposition that as networked learning has developed the boundaries between communication and content are now less defined. It may be preferable to view them as dual elements of one continuum, in which both teachers and learners are engaged in the creation and communication of content as the basis of true networked learning” (Beaty and Howard, 2010, p. 603).

The emphasis in networked learning is less about technological determinism and more about the pedagogical approach which the technology could help to realise.<sup>33</sup> In the *E-quality in e-learning Manifesto*, the authors state that although one can argue that technology does not determine educational processes, it is equally difficult for educational institutions to script the impact that technology will have upon education practice and learning processes (E-Quality Network, 2002, p.3). Similarly, Jones (2002) recognises that networked learning is often debated as a technical issue in terms of efficiency. To avoid technological determinism Beaty et al. (2010, p. 590) recommend that any “focus on technology and what it can do should be subservient to a focus on pedagogy and the learning we are aiming to foster.” The message from most writers on networked learning who advocate the collaborative and co-construction of knowledge approach is that technology should not replace sound pedagogy. It is here that this thesis can contribute through the development of some networked learning design principles, presented in chapter 10, that are built on sound pedagogical assumptions relevant for a specific networked learning community.

The term e-learning is still dominant in both the literature and practices of HE, which does support a rather technologically deterministic view. Beaty et al. (2010, p.588) note that while e-learning remains in use as a term it has more recently been acknowledged that learning of all types is now frequently and seamlessly integrating technology, such that almost all formal learning includes a blend of face to face with technologically supported connection between learners and between learners and teachers/expertise, as well as learning resources and materials. In relation to

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<sup>33</sup> This resonates with Wenger et al’s. (2009) notion of ‘technology stewarding’ which is used to describe how responsibility is taken for a community’s technology resources.



networked e-learning they go on to suggest that the 'e' should be dropped because networked learning should foreground connectivity and make this its important pedagogical feature (ibid). Dropping the 'e' would go some way in rejecting a technological deterministic approach that terms like computer supported learning, computer mediated communication and e-learning have been criticised of promoting.

In the manifesto, the authors note that the academy is above all else a community of scholars and networked learning should provide the connectivity to this resource, rather than seeing the academy as a repository of information (E-Quality Network, 2002, p.5). Networked learning largely rejects the cognitive approach and acquisition view of learning and knowledge favouring a participative pedagogy whereby knowledge is socially constructed. Pedagogical approaches such as these are not new, certainly approaches that foster and promote critical pedagogies and collaborative approaches to learning have been discussed at length (see Reynolds, 1999a, 1999b; Hodgson, 2009). Networked learning (or at least an aspiration towards it) goes further than connectivity through electronic means, the focus lies more on the co-construction of knowledge and collaborative approaches to learning. In the original manifesto, the authors wanted to rebalance the debate on e-learning and pay greater attention to the processes which support interaction and dialogue (E-Quality Network, 2002, p.5). Jones (2002, p.1) argues that networked learning forms part of a wider set of debates concerning the nature of social processes, power and culture.

In summary, a distinction between networked learning and other terms and forms of learning that involve an element of ICT can be made in the participative pedagogical aspirations of networked learning as opposed to technology determining the learning outcomes. Cousin and Deepwell (2005, p. 57) perhaps have more aptly summarised this by saying that networked learning and CoPs:

“...each rely on hospitable and peer supportive learner environments, both can be said to be social theories of learning which pull on important communitarian values (sharing knowledge, peer assessment, discussion-based based learning, etc.)”

I now go on to critically discuss the key debates within the networked learning literature relevant to this thesis. I will consider the following: learning communities and CoPs in networked learning, collaboration and community, alienation, constructing networked learning CoPs and reflection, reflexivity within networked learning, and SMEs, networked learning and HE.

### **5.3 Learning communities and CoPs in networked learning**

This thesis aims to understand better how and where a learning community conceived of as a constructed CoP learns within networked learning. Hodgson (2009, p. 132) notes that the ideas of learning communities and CoP are increasingly used in the context of technology supported learning models and approaches (see Wenger et al., 2009). Given that this thesis draws upon CoP theory to understand the learning processes within networked learning, it is useful and necessary to look at how CoPs have been conceived of and used within the debates on networked learning. As Hodgson (2009) says, SLT views learning as participation in a community and becoming a recognised member of a community. She states (2009, p. 131):

“Translated into the experience of management education, this can be interpreted as learning through participation in the pedagogy and curriculum of a given educational programme. Through this participation ‘students’ learn how to be a participant or member of a given knowledge community and acquire the language and an identity that is recognised by that community.”

Hodgson (2009, p. 131) argues that the theories and concepts associated with SLT and CoP are undoubtedly helpful for analysing, examining and understanding the process of collaborative learning. Further, Hodgson argues that it is not simply a case of being able to superimpose the idea of CoP upon educational practice(s) such as collaborative learning (ibid). Elsewhere, Hodgson recognises that SLT and CoP appear to offer prospects for reframing learning in less individualised, more socially inclined perspectives (Hodgson and Reynolds, 2005, p. 15).

There are (potentially) some contradictions between using the term ‘learning community’ and ‘community of practice’ interchangeably and even more so when applied to networked learning. So what does CoP mean within networked learning? The rest of this section addresses this. Cousin and Deepwell (2005, p. 61) note that Wenger’s work, and thus CoP theory:

“...allows us to see the importance of involvement per se; to worry less, in the first instance, about the terms of that involvement, and to understand that participation is the condition for transformation.”

Networked learning brings with it its own approach to collaborative forms of learning. The learning community and CoP as theoretical concepts also have their own ways of behaving. Hodgson (2009, p. 129) points out the learning community idea is based on a different set of ideas and thinking to those of CoPs associated with SLT. Reynolds (1999b, p. 546) shows that a learning community:

“...is based on the belief that students should be able to exercise choice in the direction and content of their learning by sharing in the decision making through which, for example, topics, methods, and membership of learning groups are determined.”

Key features of a CoP, on the other hand, are about membership and achieving full participation, learning to speak the community’s language, having a joint enterprise and developing a shared repertoire. Guldberg and Mackness (2009, p. 535) look at CoP within networked learning using the concept of Lave and Wenger’s (1991) legitimate peripheral participation to show how full participation in an online community is different to participation in a physical CoP whereby the learner requires specific learning abilities and skills, including technical skills to become a full participant. For Gulbderg and Mackness (2009, p. 535) in a physical CoP there would be time for a learner to develop these abilities and skills and, with the support of the community, to move from the periphery to full participation, but they argue that there is an added dimension of the technical skills to learn within in networked learning.

It appears that the literature surrounding CoP in relation to learning that involves ICTs, including networked learning is dominated by a view whereby communities are predominantly developed online with the extreme being virtual CoPs. It is worth briefly looking at how CoP has been dealt with in relation to online communities in order to understand how the findings from this piece of research can contribute to the debates surrounding learning communities and ICTs. Some authors have written specifically on virtual communities (Rheingold, 1993; Wellman, 1999) but in relation to learning and online communities much has been written within the field of educational research and management studies. Ryberg and Larsen (2008) note that within educational research there has been a particular focus on fostering ‘online communities’ or ‘virtual communities’ focused on supporting and nurturing online discussions within bounded spaces. Brower (2003) argues that online discussion forums can successfully capture and even go beyond the advantages of regular classroom discussion. However, networked learning does not necessarily desire to replicate the offline in the virtual world, rather it (should) be more concerned with collaboration and participative pedagogical approaches.

Some authors have suggested that internet communities have exhibited characteristics of a CoP despite never physically meeting (Teigland, 2000, p. 143). Cousin and Deepwell (2005, p. 61) take this further suggesting that a networked learning group could take on conditions of a CoP such as developing a shared repertoire. However, they do concede that they see some problems with generating the conditions for this to take place, one being that the UK HE structure is module-centred and a shared repertoire cannot be rushed into existence (Cousin and Deepwell, 2005, p. 61). Kimble et al. (2008) have discussed at length whether CoPs can exist in formal and informal online learning environments. Just as Wenger (1998) notes that we belong to multiple CoPs we also have multiple identities on and offline (see Wellman, 1999; Ryberg and Larsen, 2008). Hodgson and Reynolds (2005, p.22) apply the idea of multiple communities to networked learning and propose that online work offers HE the prospect of structures that can facilitate multiple communities as a way of recognising and supporting difference and learning from difference (see also Reynolds and Trehan, 2001). Cousin and Deepwell (2005, p. 58) directly address the combination of CoP and networked learning. They argue that the values of CoP complement networked learning aiming to expose the “intimate connections between

ways of being and ways of coming to know, and the importance of social practices and place (virtual or real) for their emergence” (ibid).

CoPs within networked learning is an area that would benefit from more research. As discussed, the two are not synonymous with one another but they do share similar values. The concepts of learning within CoP theory and within networked learning do share similarities but are different. In simple terms learning within CoPs centres around participation and engagement in a particular practice. It is ‘situated’ in everyday practices.<sup>34</sup> Learning within networked learning emphasizes relational dialogue in the construction of knowledge and meaning (Beatty et al., 2010). SLT and CoP theory are theories of learning, *social* theories of learning which seek to understand the process of learning and the creation and circulation of knowledge. This thesis uses CoP theory in relation to networked learning so it is important to address how the CoP ideal has been conceived within networked learning. To that end I now go on to address collaboration, which is a feature of both CoP theory and networked learning.

#### **5.4 Critiques of collaboration and community in networked learning**

Given that the version of networked learning I am drawing upon supports collaborative approaches to learning and views learning as a social process it is important to address what collaboration (and connectivity) mean within networked learning. Hodgson (2009, p 128) shows how the work associated with online learning and networked management learning has come to see collaborative learning within learning communities as one of the key and significant benefits to be gained from online discussions within distance or virtual management education programmes. She goes on to argue that an increasing amount of research in networked management learning focuses on the process and benefits of collaborative learning and learning communities (Hodgson, 2009, p. 129). Further, she notes that this research adopts a social constructionist emphasis and an interest in language and the construction of meaning through dialogue (ibid). Similarly, McConnell (2005) argues that

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<sup>34</sup> Contu and Wilmott (2003, p. 284) highlight that Lave and Wenger did not intend for this situatedness to be seen as a independently located somewhere. They argue that an adequate understanding of learning must fully acknowledge both its embodied (“lived-in”) and its historically and culturally embedded (“generative” qualities).

collaboration can develop critical thinking, helping to clarify ideas and concepts through discussion. Collaboration, then, is bound up with dialogue (see Ferreday et al., 2006) and dialogue has been viewed as the pedagogy of networked learning (Guldberg, 2008). Additionally, language is seen to be important in the co-construction of knowledge and of identities within learning communities (see Jones et al., 2008). Hodgson and Reynolds (2010, p. 595) argue that language is the means by which learners construct reality, establish social relations, act in relation to each other and develop their professional identity.

Given that language and (relational) dialogue is integral to networked learning some authors suggest that networked learning can offer a more promising medium for supporting participative approaches to higher learning than more conventional media (Hodgson and Reynolds, 2005, p.11). As discussed, the pedagogical underpinnings of networked learning centre on collaboration, but the ideal of collaboration is not without challenges. Hodgson and Reynolds (2010, p. 595) note that participative approaches to learning involve students and tutors in complex social and political dynamics which need to be understood and worked with. Collaboration can also be seen to be problematic. Some authors have critiqued what collaboration means in terms of learning (see Hodgson, 2009). Similarly, ‘community’ as an ideal in learning has also been critiqued. Hodgson and Reynolds (2005, p.14) state:

“...the idea of community is invariably used normatively in higher educational discourse, so that while it might often be difficult to be sure of its precise meaning-in-use, it is strongly suggestive of values and practices which are unquestionably and morally desirable.”

In the same article the authors critique the notion of ‘community’, especially its association with consensus and pressures to conform. They note that networked learning appears just as prone to interpretations of community that embody unquestioned assumptions of consensus (ibid, p. 16). In response to this they propose examples of networked learning which aim to incorporate a concept of community which is not limited by assumptions of consensus (ibid, p.12). Similarly, Cousin and Deepwell (2005, p. 61) address issues of consensus and the inherent contradictions of

imposing democratic processes on learners as part of a community. As McConnell (2005, p. 39) points out:

“It is all too easy for teachers to include group work in a collaborative learning design in the assumption that the technology itself will support the work of the group.”

However, on the whole the notion of community and collaborative learning is a strong ideal within networked learning. For ‘collaborative’ educators, the values of community are seen as offering an alternative to more individualistic approaches (Hodgson and Reynolds, 2005, p. 15). Hodgson (2008, p. 159) comments there is a strong association in much of the theory and practice of online learning with the values of collaboration and community. However, there are also debates in networked learning that challenge the notion of collaboration and community (see Reynolds, 2000) that impel us to recognise and work with splinter groups (Hodgson and Reynolds, 2005), with difference (Reynolds and Trehan, 2003) and even with tyranny of participation (Ferreday and Hodgson, 2008). An important factor in developing communities and the collaborative pedagogies underpinning networked learning is trust (see Swan, 2002; Garrison and Anderson, 2003). Jones et al. (2006) argue that trust is at the heart of learning in networked relationships. McConnell (2005) urges us to pay attention to developing trustful relationships as they can foster collaborative work. This is an area within networked learning that needs more critical attention and one which this thesis can contribute to.

Despite the critiques surrounding the terms community and collaboration in networked learning Cousin and Deepwell (2005, p. 64) argue that the concept of community remains a helpful ‘imaginary’ for the encouragement of change and learning. The critiques of collaborative approaches to learning show how they can be problematic with a possible (unintended) outcome being that of alienation, which I now go on to discuss.

## 5.5 Alienation in networked learning

Much of the writing on networked learning and collaborative approaches to learning takes an optimistic approach to the ideal of what being part of a (learning) community can entail. Some authors even go so far as to say that a utopian view of networked learning has been promoted in the literature (see Beaty et al., 2010, p. 587). In chapter 4 I addressed non participation and dis-identification within CoPs whereby members can reject the identity connected with the practice (Hodges, 1998). In relation to networked learning some authors have critiqued the notion of community in terms of learning and HE (see Reynolds, 1999b, 2000). Hodgson and Reynolds (2010, p. 596) address the flip side of collaborative learning, stating:

“...in a network based on participative, collaborative or other community-like values, there will always be the possibility of unequal power and control, and differences in how readily people feel able to take part, procedurally or conceptually.”

Elsewhere, the same authors have argued that being a member of a community usually entails subjugation to its core values and norms of behaviour, and to deviate from these in resisting assimilation is to run the risk of becoming marginalised in order that the integrity of the community is preserved (Hodgson and Reynolds, 2005, p.16). Similarly, Ferreday and Hodgson (2008, p. 2) have explored the tyranny of participation whereby participation for some participants can be anything but emancipatory. This tyranny, however unintended, may be experienced as an unjust/unfair exercise of domination and power. This can be related to members of a CoP who do not engage with the joint enterprise or the shared repertoire and thus are not considered to be on a trajectory of participation within the CoP. As Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 42 note:

“Hegemony over resources for learning and alienation from full participation are inherent in the shaping of the legitimacy and peripherality of participation in its historical realizations.”



Networked learning is seen by many to offer, for example, possibilities for new forms of communication that have the potential to be more open and supportive of inclusive educational practices (Hodgson and Reynolds, 2010, p. 594). However, this needs careful management and an understanding of the process of learning through computer supported means. Writing on distance education Brower (2003) suggests that the most common objection to distance learning is that students feel isolated and dissatisfied with the delivery because of a lack of interaction. I do not suggest that networked learning is the same thing as distance learning but the possibilities of alienation are still very real. Mann (2005, p. 45) notes how the concept of the online learning community is based on pedagogical assumptions of connection and belonging, which are likely to reduce potential alienation. Her work addresses alienation from the perspective of ‘failure of communication’ rather than the failure of the community. She argues for the opening up of communication between learners, and between learners and teachers so that the individual can have a voice in the learning group which brings with it a responsibility to others in the group (Mann, 2005, p. 53).

Alienation may be caused by lack of trust. Hodgson and Reynolds (2010, p. 599) propose: “where trust is not present or relationships not developed it can leave participants feeling exposed and lead to a lack of confidence in their contributions.” They go on to ask whether our (HE) pedagogies support space and time for trust and confidence to develop (ibid, p. 600). Networked learning is not concerned with translating the offline to the online. It requires a different blend of resources combining full technical and curriculum design support (E-Quality Network, 2002, p.7). Getting these elements right has an influence on the development of trust within networked learning. Alienation or disengagement is a very real possibility for any learning community in general. Guldberg and Mackness (2009, p. 536) point out that learners may find themselves isolated from a community if they fail to understand the culture, norms and learning tensions or do not have the necessary technical skills which could lead to experiencing emotions which make them unable to establish effective connections with the community.

Having discussed learning communities, collaboration and alienation in relation to networked learning, this chapter looks at three aspects of networked learning:

constructing CoPs within networked learning, reflexivity and networked learning, SMEs and HE. Firstly, I look specifically at how CoPs have been conceptualised and discussed within networked learning.

## **5.6 Constructing networked learning CoPs**

Constructing CoPs is not synonymous with networked learning. Networked learning is about connections and interactions (see Jones and Dirckinck-Holmfeld, 2009). CoP theory is concerned with situated learning. As discussed above learning, in networked learning, is about the construction of knowledge through dialogue and is about connections. Learning in CoP terms focuses on practice situated in (everyday) contexts. CoPs in networked learning would need to have features of both. One of the key areas of focus in this thesis is that of constructing a learning community within networked learning, with attention on whether a CoP can be constructed with networked learning as the context or environment for this construction. In chapter 4 I looked at the debates surrounding whether CoPs can be constructed. Wenger and Snyder (2000) debate whether or not CoPs can be constructed and argue that, like a garden, they benefit from cultivation. So can CoPs be constructed or cultivated within networked learning? Cousin and Deepwell (2005) write specifically on this point using the example from CoP theory to apply to networked learning. It is important to note again that networked learning is not synonymous with e-learning as discussed earlier in this chapter. Cousin and Deepwell (2005, p. 58) are concerned with the intimate linkages in networked learning. For them learning in networked learning is bound up with identity. They go on to stress Wenger's (1998) point that learning cannot be designed, "it can only be designed *for*" (Cousin and Deepwell, 2005, p. 63, emphasis in the original). Just as Wenger (1998) argues that an effective CoP has to ensure a balance between reification and participation, that is taking that which is abstract and turning it into a 'congealed' form, represented for example in documents and symbols (reification) and the active involvement in social processes (participation). Cousin and Deepwell (2005, p.63) say: "Translated to the context of networked learning, reification can be about shared assessment assignments and/or the generation of learning resources; it can also be about a set of ground rules." It is worth noting that Cousin and Deepwell's example is that of networked learning within an HE context, not all networked learning takes place within an HE setting.

So, can CoPs be constructed or cultivated in networked learning? I would argue that they can, but attention needs to be paid to the principles of CoP theory and networked learning. We need to be aware of these if we aspire to creating environments whereby CoPs can be cultivated within networked learning. This point is addressed again in chapter 8. As a warning on this point Cousin and Deepwell (2005, p. 60) note:

“If a group of people is held together by external management or teacher control, and if its activities are confined largely to the contractual, it is likely to be low on the internal means by which it can congeal into a community of practice. In pedagogic settings, this presents problems for a technicist, learning outcomes approach to course design.”

This study shows that applying the theoretical lens of CoP theory to a networked learning community can add insights on how and where learning takes place.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, it also highlights the importance of the facilitators within networked learning for the community maintenance, and thus the need for reflexivity on the part of educationalists and learners, which is the next point for discussion.

## **5.7 Reflection and reflexivity within networked learning**

There are discussions in the broader literature of management learning and educational research in general, that focus on the need for reflection and reflexivity on the part of students and tutors (see Reynolds 1999a, 1999b; Reynolds and Vince, 2004). This point is applied to networked learning by E-Quality Network (2002) and Beaty et al. (2010) who argue that if networked learning is to become a rich and robust educational practice that provides quality learning environments, practitioners need to engage in critical and reflexive evaluation of their own practice. Similarly, Hodgson and Reynolds (2010, p.598) suggest that networked learning provides a space for dialogue and interaction that supports the co-construction of knowledge, identity and learning. This, they say, should be exposed to critical analysis and reflection (ibid). As discussed above networked learning supports a social

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<sup>35</sup> I will also be using ANT to add to this understanding and will show how ANT and CoP can be used together to contribute to networked learning. The summary of part two explores this.

constructionist approach to learning and the literature highlights the importance of relational dialogue in the construction and circulation of knowledge. Beaty et al. (2010, p. 589) argue that:

“...this view demands and requires critical reflexivity to examine both the nature of knowledge being developed and identities constructed. Which in turn involves taking responsibility as a learner for both one’s own learning and for others within learning networks.”

The pedagogical approach underpinning networked learning is different to the dominant view of education whereby knowledge is seen to be acquired rather than socially constructed. Supporting the arguments that call for reflexivity I argue that designers of networked learning, facilitators, tutors and so on need to be aware of their role within the learning community in which they reside (see Smith, forthcoming). Wenger (1998, p. 9) argues that we must become reflective with regard to our own discourses of learning and to their effects on the ways we design for learning. Additionally, networked learning is not a substitute for, or cost effective substitutes for, online or distance learning and therefore needs reflexivity to ensure that the pedagogical principles are upheld. Denis et al. (2004) note the role of the e-tutor (or e-moderator) is integral to the community maintenance of the learning community. Reflexivity is important within networked learning and anyone involved in networked learning should be critically reflexive.

Having discussed the key debates surrounding networked learning that are relevant to this thesis I now explore the context in which the learners of this study are located, i.e. SMEs. There is a gap in the dialogue between SMEs and networked learning with a focus from policy and the SME literature on the use and benefits of ICT but very little written on how SMEs can use ICT through the medium or pedagogical approach of networked learning. Thus I present the following overview.

## **5.8 SMEs, networked learning and higher education**

Cousin and Deepwell (2005, p. 590) state that since the networked e-learning manifesto was published there has been a great deal of focus on the importance of ICT for learning. I show how these debates have not connected with those surrounding the importance of ICTs in SMEs and the importance for SMEs to engage with HE such as through knowledge exchange initiatives. In the debates on networked learning and HE Beaty et al. (2010) show that there is still a tendency to focus on ICT however, these debates do not connect with those surrounding the benefits of SMEs engaging with HE. The first part of this section looks at the rhetoric surrounding the importance of ICTs for businesses and how there is little to connect the potential of networked learning and businesses (particularly SMEs) through the use of ICTs. Jones (2002, p.7) argues that a policy for networked learning needs to be developed that goes beyond what he calls the stale agenda associated with uncritical modern capitalist practices and managerialism. Jones notes that the UK government has promoted networked technologies using a variety of policy initiatives which have been informed by a 20 year vision for higher education (ibid, p. 1-2). Additionally, Jones argues that a policy for networked technologies needs choices about how to use new technologies need to be infused with a more critical edge that centres on the needs of education and learning (ibid, p. 7). This thesis is an attempt to bridge this gap in the area of networked learning, SMEs and HE.

The government has identified the growth and application of ICTs and the development of electronic services and the skills to use them as crucial to the UK economy as we move towards an information age (Cabinet Office, 2005). Additionally, the European Union placed great emphasis on achieving the goal of becoming the world's most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy by 2010 (Dixon et al., 2002). ICT adoption and use is seen as a key enabler in this respect but there is little consideration in policy documents about how ICT can be used in the form of networked learning for SMEs. Coming from a different angle, that of HE and technology, Jones (2002) explores whether a policy can be made for networked learning. His overview provides a comprehensive account of this exploration. However, there is still a wide gap between the policy debates around SMEs and those on the potential of ICTs and networked learning and HE.

Government reports and other literatures point towards ICT being a positive factor within businesses which contribute to the economy, but despite the initiatives and the discourse surrounding ICT adoption, there is little discussion of on how ICTs can be used as learning opportunities for, and within, small businesses. The Northwest Regional Economic Strategy (RES) suggests that the use of ICT by businesses brings many benefits: efficiency through supporting the development and creation of sustainable businesses, whilst reducing the cost of doing business; customer service through enhancing service delivery in the eyes of the customer; growth by reaching new markets and customers; and providing a platform for business innovation and collaboration by enabling an environment of collaborative working and sharing of information (NWDA, 2005). The RES also states that businesses are not maximising the potential of ICT and there is a need to raise awareness of the potential economic impact of ICT and digital technologies (NWDA, 2006).

I argue that one way of maximising the potential of ICTS for small businesses is through networked learning. I am not championing pure e-learning as such, more so I take the definition used above of networked learning to show how ICTs can be used to connect SMEs with other resources, predominantly that of HE through the vehicle of knowledge exchange (see chapter 2 and also Robson et al., 1997 for a discussion on how HE institutions can play a vital role in SME growth and development). A thriving small business sector is central to the vision of economic growth in the UK (see BIS 2010). It is widely accepted that ICT and new technology will enable SMEs to become more competitive. There is an overall presumption that ICT is a 'good thing' for SMEs (Dixon et al., 2002). Although the government recognises that ICT is a key factor for SME competitiveness and growth. Dixon et al. (2002) comment how much of SME policy has been shaped by a consideration of the lowest common denominator from a purely pragmatic standpoint. They argue that further research needs to be undertaken in the area of SMEs that recognises the diversity of firm and culture so that policy can more accurately be tailored to fit SMEs' requirements (Dixon et al., 2002). Although the relationship between ICT and SMEs is firmly linked to UK government policy, there have been problems with developing research in the area (Brock, 2000). Southern and Tilley (2000) suggest that this is because there is a lack of analytical clarity on the small firm and how it should be viewed, which has led to a limited conceptual understanding of the relationship between small firms and ICTs.

Additionally, little is known about how small firms are responding to the opportunities provided by ICTs, if indeed small firms see the technology as an opportunity. Even less is known about why and how small firms use ICTs. Many impact studies have therefore used a technologically deterministic approach that overlooks managers and employees (Dixon et al., 2002). Further, I argue that discussions surrounding ICTs and small businesses are missing the opportunity of exploring how networked learning can benefit SMEs.

This thesis shows how ICT can be used to support a learning community of SME leaders through networked learning that has very real economic benefits for the businesses and the region (see Wren and Jones, 2006; A D Little, 2003). There is very little written within policy documents about the potential of online discussion forums and social technologies for businesses large and small. For example, the RES makes reference to online forums but in the context of providing a 'lifeline' to people suffering from debilitating conditions (Cabinet Office, 2005). Social technologies are currently absent from policies directed at SMEs yet outside of the business world phenomena such Facebook are gaining unprecedented momentum. Similar social websites have been set up for businesses, for example, Twitter and LinkedIn but policies are slow to address how social technologies can be used to connect SMEs for economic benefit.

One of the few academic texts that links networked learning and SMEs is Ponti and Hodgson's (2006) paper which sets out eight learning principles designed to assist in the design of a networked management learning programme for SME managers. Their aim was to identify learning principles that would guide and assist in the design of a networked management learning action-based learning programme for this group of SME manager learners. Their principles were drawn from a European project which focused on Engaging Networks for Sustainable eLearning (ENSeL). The partners learnt about how to create networks, how to work together, and how learning principles can be applied in the SME sector (ENSeL, 2005). Ponti and Hodgson's (2006) work extracts the learning principles from this project and shows how a model was designed which drew on socio-cultural learning theories to inform a trial involving SME managers which was conducted in three countries. In this project networked learning was offered as an alternative to formal management education.

They argue that networked management learning is ideal for achieving relational dialogue between managers and educators to leverage work and life experience. Their model was informed by the following learning principles:

- 1 Our focus is on learning which has a perceived value to the learners.
- 2 Responsibility for the learning process is shared (between all actors in this process).
- 3 Learning is situated and context dependent.
- 4 Time has to be allowed to build relationships.
- 5 Learning is better supported in collaborative settings and dialogue plays a major part in the collaborative learning process.
- 6 Social interaction allows for co-construction of knowledge, which promotes engagement of learners in work based and problem-based learning.
- 7 The role of the facilitator/animator is essential for collaborative eLearning.
- 8 Critical reflexivity is an important part of the learning process for evaluating and examining both the learning process itself and the resultant actions taken.

(Ponti and Hodgson, 2006, p.3)

They argue that networked management learning reinforces the centrality of networking entrepreneurs and other relevant actors at the local level to increase the effectiveness of their actions and also helps integrate the different components of the local economy within a wider system (Ponti and Hodgson, 2006, p.1). They conclude that there is a tension between the potential opportunities that collaborative peer learning entails through networked learning and the desire for a more structured and instrumental approach to solving their business problems (ibid, p.6). Further, they suggest that both participants and facilitators are not always able/ready to pursue these kinds of approaches (ibid). This links to the need for reflexivity to be built into networked learning programmes for both participants and facilitators that is discussed below.

The context of this study is SME leaders in networked learning and the thesis aims to contribute to filling the identified gap between policies on ICT and SMEs and those of HE and SMEs through knowledge exchange activities. The contribution suggests that networked learning is one way to bridge this gap that can have a real impact on SMEs



(see Wren and Jones, 2006). Developing a greater understanding for how SME leaders within networked learning can contribute practically to the development, design and facilitation of knowledge exchange initiatives.

## **5.9 Summary**

This chapter has provided an overview of the key debates surrounding networked learning in relation to this thesis which aims to explore how and where SME leaders learn in networked learning. It has highlighted that the area of networked learning has been underexplored in its potential use for learning with, and for, SMEs particularly in the area of knowledge exchange and HE. Additionally it has shown that forms of learning using ICTs have a tendency for technological determinism. Networked learning should be seen as an approach to connecting people and resources and should be based on sound pedagogy rather than a technologically deterministic view. Critical reflexivity is part of the process of ensuring that networked learning can move beyond technological determinism. This thesis contributes to the area of design in networked learning for SME leaders and shows how networked learning can be used by HE through knowledge exchange initiatives.

This chapter is the final chapter in part two of the thesis. The next section gives a summary of how the three literature reviews work together, focusing on how ANT and SLT/CoP theory as lenses for analysis work together to contribute to our understanding of SME leaders' learning within networked learning.

## **PART TWO SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

The three literature reviews provided a critical overview of the key debates in the areas of ANT, SLT/CoP theory, and networked learning. These concluding comments highlight for the reader the rationale for using SLT/CoP theory and ANT together as theoretical frameworks for the study of SME leaders' learning and as lenses for analysis. I go on to summarise how SLT/CoP theory and ANT have been used together. I then summarise how each has been used in networked learning. Finally I show why and how they are used together in this study to develop our understanding of how and where learning takes place within networked learning, with a focus on SME leaders.

### **Summary of using SLT/CoP theory and ANT together**

Within the general field of management studies the theories of CoP and ANT have been combined. At a philosophical level they may, in Kuhnian terms, be considered incommensurable but I suggest that they can be used quite practically together to cast a different light on the same phenomenon. Wenger (2010) has explored the commensurability of ANT and CoP arguing that it is possible to have a critical dialogue between ANT and CoP theory. He also suggests that each has different vocabularies to tell stories about the world, and as social scientists we should know that one is not better than the other per se, and the role of theory in research should be guided by the stories about the world we are trying to tell. The difference between CoP and ANT lies in their approaches to what each aims to achieve. SLT and CoP are theories of learning, whereas ANT is a theory of relations and connections that include humans and non-humans.

It has been argued that CoP usually looks at relations within organizations whereas ANT focuses attention away from the organization as the unit of analysis and towards the wider fabric of network relations (Swan et al., 2002, p. 482). I use CoP and ANT as theoretical frameworks in two ways. Firstly, I use the central concepts within each to apply to the data as lenses for analysis. Secondly, I propose that the learning community under investigation can be conceived of as an actor-network *and* a CoP. Other studies have not used CoP and ANT in this way. My aim in using ANT and CoP

together is not to forge a new theory, rather, it is to use them as theoretical frameworks to shed light on the same phenomenon.

### **Summary of SLT/CoP theory and networked learning**

SLT and CoP theory are theories of learning, *social* theories of learning which seek to understand the process of learning and the creation and circulation of knowledge. In doing so they show how newcomers to a CoP gain fuller participation as they learn the practices of a particular CoP. These theories help us to understand the practices within CoPs and the learning that takes place. In the area of networked learning CoP theory has had more dominance (see Cousin and Deepwell, 2005) although ANT has been used (see Fox, 2005; Thompson, 2010).

By complementing ANT with SLT/CoP theory I argue that our partial understanding of what happens within an actor-network can become less partial. Fox (2000, p. 860) argues that learning:

“...is seen as an outcome of a process of local struggle and that struggle is many-faceted involving the self acting upon itself, as well as upon others and upon the material world.”

I argue that SLT/CoP theory and ANT together help us to understand this better. SLT and CoP theory complement ANT as theoretical frameworks employed to help to answer the research questions. However, these theories also do not overtly address SMEs directly or multi-organizational CoPs which is the context of this study.

### **Summary of ANT and networked learning**

I have shown how ANT can be used as a theoretical framework to understand how networks come together and are stabilized. Rooted in science and technology studies, a typical ANT study explores how heterogeneous networks made up of human and non-human actors/actants are a process of enrolment in the overall process of translation. Recently, authors such as Fox (2005) have argued that ANT is a theory of knowledge and I demonstrated how it could be considered to be an emergent learning

theory. It is this direction and potential focus of ANT as a learning theory that is used in this study in relation to networked learning.

ANT explains how networks come into being and can help contribute to our understanding of how a learning network emerges and is sustained. It shows the importance of the primary actor and the need for the network to be stabilized. Being descriptive, ANT is actually useful in the context of this thesis. However, ANT does not aim to explain the intentions of actors' actions and therefore does not help in fully answering the research questions and it falls short of making sense of how and where people learn within networked learning. ANT can only ever help us to have a partial understanding of the relations, descriptions and meanings within a network.

ANT theorists prefer to talk about the ties between networks, hence the hyphen between actor and network, which I argue can contribute to our understanding of how learning communities can be formed within networked learning. Networks are seen as complex arrangements of space with no clear centre or dependence on hierarchical relationships and without any clear differentiation between the global and the local (McBride, 2003). ANT can help to understand the relations between people and artefacts no matter what the local or global scale. However, ANT can go too far beyond the local context which is predominantly the focus of SLT and CoP. Additionally, being social theories of learning, SLT and CoP focus largely on the human actors and interactions and less on the artefacts which is where ANT's principle of general symmetry can be used. CoP theory does recognise that artefacts play a significant role in the CoP but the focus tends to be more on what the CoP produces and maintains (Wenger, 2000a) or which artefacts cross boundaries (Star and Griesemer 1989; Wenger, 2000a). The principle of general symmetry helps us to follow all actors including non-human artefacts and focuses more on network building as opposed to what the network produces. Having no a priori distinction of what to follow, ANT complements SLT/CoP to show how a network comes into being and is stabilized.

## **Using SLT/CoP theory and ANT in networked learning**

In this thesis ANT, CoP and SLT are used together to explore how and where learning takes place in networked learning. I have discussed how the pedagogic values of networked learning and CoP have been perceived to overlap and how both rely on peer-supportive learning environments. Equally, CoP theory has been used in studies adopting a collaborative approach to learning akin to the philosophical underpinnings of networked learning as outlined originally in the manifesto (E-Quality Network, 2002). Adding ANT into the mix of SLT/CoP theory and networked learning is not common. One of the few authors who has combined them is Fox (2005), who argues that networked learning should not be seen as simply a new form of literacy programme for a new medium operating on the same principle as the print-based media industry. In tandem he uses CoP theory to provide a context for understanding practices within communities that can be applied to HE. Elsewhere Fox (2000, p. 860) notes: “community of practice theory tells us nothing about how, in practice, members of a community change their practice.” Networked learning, by its very nature, seeks to be critical and have a positive effect. This thesis argues that combining SLT/CoP theory with ANT we can add to our understanding of how CoPs can change their practice by focusing on the processes of learning.

The context of this study is HE and I use CoP and ANT to further our understanding of the learning processes within a networked learning programme for SME leaders. There are no studies which have combined CoP and ANT to understand how and where learning takes place within networked learning. Taking this a step further, there are few studies that look at how SME leaders learn within networked learning (cf. Ponti and Hodgson, 2006, for a discussion on SME managers’ learning within networked learning). Combining ANT and SLT/CoP theory to explore how SMEs leaders learn in networked learning is unique and I argue that this study can be used to develop some principles for networked learning communities such as the one being studied.

I show how CoP and ANT can help us to understand how and where SME leaders learn within networked learning, conceptualising the learning community simultaneously as a CoP and an actor-network. The specific context of this study

covers three main areas: (1) HE and knowledge exchange; (2) leaders of SMEs and (3) networked learning. The literature reviews highlighted that SMEs were largely missing from the debates across all three main bodies of literature. This is one of the areas I make a key contribution to. There has been little written about learning communities made up of SMEs within networked learning. Certainly, there are no studies which explore SME leaders in networked learning. Further, there is limited discussion around conceiving learning communities as constructed CoPs, particularly those made up of multiple organizations. The main body of literature I contribute to is networked learning through analysing how and where learning takes place in this environment. Further, the context of the study is a knowledge exchange leadership programme which is part funded by the NWDA as part of the university's knowledge exchange activities. These activities are part of a wider political landscape which sees universities as conduits for economic development and thus I present some practical design principles that can be used to inform this type of activity.

I show how using SLT/CoP theory and ANT helps to create a better understanding of how and where SME leaders learn in networked learning. The combination of using SLT/CoP theory, ANT and networked learning brings fresh insights into our understanding of learning processes and shows new ways of looking at some of the key tenets of the theories of SLT/CoP theory and ANT. To date there has been more use of SLT and CoP theory than ANT within networked learning. CoP theory has largely been used to show how learners gain fuller participation within a community. However, ANT has been used to show how people are translated into learners through HE and also to highlight the significance of non-human actors. Outside of networked learning specifically but still in the area of education some authors have used ANT and CoP theory together. One such author is Fox (2005, p. 97) who argues that CoP theory provides an analytical viewpoint on learning: a way of understanding it. He says ANT provides a particular set of understandings of social and material phenomena, which can help us understand the place of education in the wider international community (*ibid*, p. 102).

This concludes the summary and closing comments to part two of the thesis. I have provided a rationale for using ANT and SLT/CoP theory as lenses for analysis and have shown that this combination is relatively unique particularly in the area of SMEs

and networked learning. Part three of this thesis outlines the methodology used to explore how and where SME leaders learn in networked learning.

## **INTRODUCTION TO PART THREE: METHODOLOGY**

Chapter 6 presents a detailed overview of the research methodology and is presented in two parts. The first part provides an overview of why I am studying this phenomenon and describes my research journey, including the pilot research. This part details the research journey in developing an appropriate methodology to approach the research questions. The research is interpretive and it is important to outline for the reader the decisions and frameworks used for the methodology which influence the subsequent data analysis and claims.

The second part outlines the main project and the methods used to answer the research questions: how and where do SME leaders learn in networked learning and how is the learning community constructed? In this study I have conducted an on and offline ethnography of one LEAD cohort. These data are supplemented by qualitative interviews with delegates from other cohorts alongside numerous documents such as emails, policy documents and my own reflective writing in my ethnographic diary.

The aim of this chapter is to provide a philosophical understanding of where the research and subsequent analysis is located. Accordingly, it provides an understanding of the ontological and epistemological perspective of the study.



## **CHAPTER 6**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### CHAPTER 6:

#### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 Research questions
- 6.3 Personal research journey
- 6.4 Methodological approach
- 6.5 Philosophical framework
  - 6.5.1 Constructionism and social constructionism
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- 6.12 Theoretical frameworks and data analysis
- 6.13 Concluding comments

## **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides an overview of the research methodology used to research how and where SME leaders learn in networked learning. It gives an understanding of how I came to study this and why a qualitative approach is used. Accordingly, it locates the study within the philosophical foundation of social constructionism, which shapes the ontological and epistemological perspectives that inform the data collection and analysis used in order to explore the research questions. I outline the research in practice discussing the practicalities of the online and offline ethnography that was undertaken for the main study. Additionally, I show how the data have validity and reliability in the context of this study. The latter part of the chapter considers the data analysis using the theoretical frameworks of ANT and SLT/CoP theory.

## **6.2 Research Questions**

The central aim of this study is to analyse the learning processes within a learning community in the context of networked learning. Specifically, there are three main research questions which ask:

1. How is a networked learning community of SME leaders constructed?
2. How do SME leaders learn in networked learning?
3. Where do SME leaders learn in networked learning?

The literature reviews of ANT, SLT and, consequently, CoP theory, along with networked learning, highlighted that small businesses are largely absent from discussions and debates within all three. The context of this thesis is a leadership and management networked learning programme for leaders of small businesses. This programme is part of the knowledge exchange initiatives as discussed in chapter 2. Knowledge exchange is a growing area across UK universities and this research can contribute to our understanding of how SME leaders learn and how universities can engage positively with this knowledge exchange agenda through networked learning. Thus, one objective of this thesis is to help our understanding of designing networked

learning programmes in order to have a real impact on the leadership of small business.

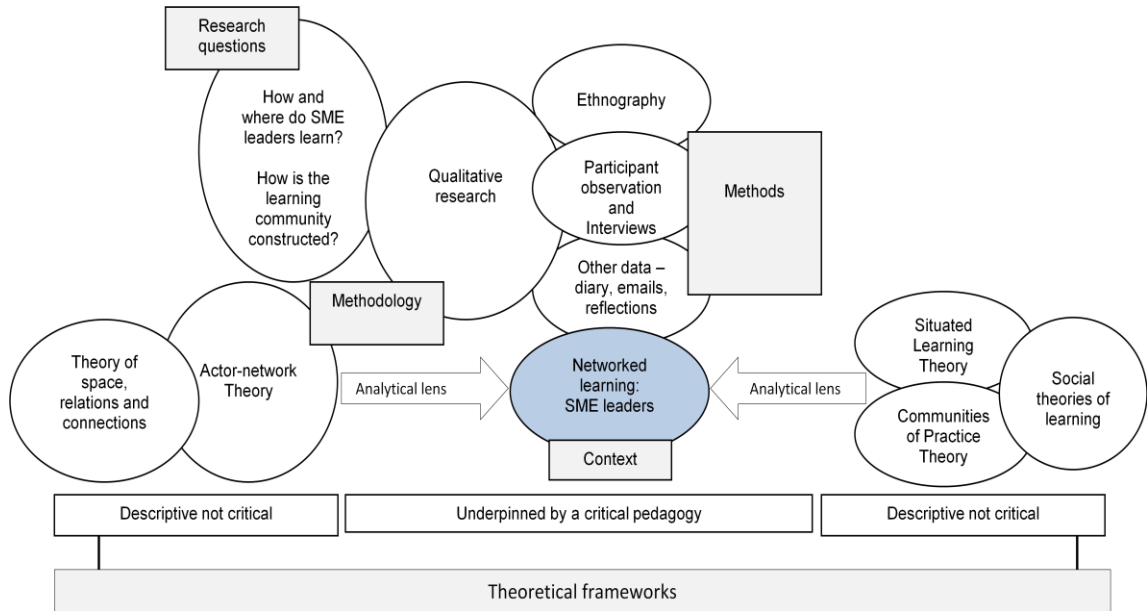
Figure 4 below provides an overview of the research process and is discussed throughout this chapter. Starting at the top left hand corner it shows that the research questions (how and where do SME leaders learn within networked learning and how is the learning community constructed?) were approached with a qualitative methodology. Moving to the right the figure shows that the qualitative research was undertaken with an ethnographic study (including a virtual ethnography). The methods in this study included participant observation and interviews supported by other data such as my own diary and reflections plus emails from the research subjects. At the bottom of the diagram is the context which lays the foundations for the whole of the study. The context was networked learning and, specifically, SME leaders in networked learning. The theoretical frameworks of ANT and SLT / CoP theory underpin the analysis. These are shown to be feeding into the context of SME leaders in networked learning and are used to understand the learning processes within this context. On the left hand side, ANT is presented as a theory of space, relations and connections. Additionally, it is used methodologically. ANT advocates that the researcher should follow the actors (including human and non-human actors). This approach sits well with the ethnography whereby as researcher I followed the actors into different contexts both on and offline. This is discussed at length in this chapter. On the right hand side the figure shows the second theoretical framework of SLT / CoP theory. CoP theory can be seen as part of SLT but the two are used together as social theories of learning to understand the context of the study. Both ANT and SLT / CoP theory are used as analytical lenses for analysis.

Finally, the very bottom of the diagram shows that ANT, on the left, and SLT / CoP theory, on the right are seen to be descriptive theories rather than critical<sup>36</sup> in the context of this study. Networked learning, on the other hand, is presented as being underpinned by a critical pedagogy.

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<sup>36</sup> That is not to say that these theoretical frameworks cannot be used critically. Contu and Wilmott (2003) for example reclaim the critical edge of SLT. They argue that any notion of criticality in SLT has been marginalized through the popularization of its use and use Orr's (1990) study of photocopier technicians to offer a less conservative reading of SLT. Brown and Duguid (1994) have used ANT to critically review approaches to the social, material and political aspects of information technologies.

This figure summarises the discussions which take place throughout the whole of the chapter.



**Figure 4: Overview of methodology**

The presentation of this thesis in the form that it takes inevitably reads like a linear account. However, it is a construction that involves both the reader and the writer and did not unfold with the neatness that its organization into eleven chapters may imply. The process of finding a research angle, the ongoing redefinition of research questions, revisiting the methodological approach and methods and subsequently the data analysis was a lengthy process (particularly as this was a part time study) and one which involved constant iteration over the period of six years. This process resonates with Law's (2004) overview of 'mess' in social science research in which he offers a few metaphors for research, such as 'slippery', 'elusive', 'messy', 'emotional', 'lost' and 'unpredictable' (p. 6). Figure 4 is an attempt to simplify the mess of this specific piece of social science research. The PhD itself was a journey, one of personal and professional discovery which I outline below.

### **6.3 Personal research journey**

My journey in finding my PhD focus was not a smooth process and the focus of the research is dramatically different from the original PhD proposal. In this section I provide the reader with a brief background of my journey. This chapter shows how, as director of the programme under investigation, I am part of the research phenomenon. I argue that this is not necessarily problematic and instead is a position that should be noted, celebrated and used for practical effect. Therefore, I feel it is important to not only contextualise my journey but also to provide an account of how my focus was shaped by the events I describe below, most notably by a seemingly throwaway conversation with a colleague. I first outline my own experience of research and interest in my subject area which influences the research aims. I then go on to tell my story about how I have arrived at my research focus and unit of analysis.

Interest in the PhD arose from a previous job I had as a research manager for a commercial market research company. The research I undertook in this role centred on technology and user behaviour. As such I explored many aspects of technology and the user experience of mobile phones, interactive television and the Internet. In particular I focused on how and why consumers did and did not use these technologies. I managed many commercially funded qualitative and quantitative research projects which had a typical lifespan of four months, projects that Bell (1999) terms as '100-hour' projects. These research projects were carried out between 1999 – 2003 during a period which saw the rise and fall of the 'dot com boom' and the early stages of mass mobile phone use, particularly amongst teenagers. Although these research projects were commercially funded, the market research company had close links with Lancaster university through the management school and the department of sociology. Through these links I was able to research user behaviour in an academic context and write academic papers on teenagers and mobile phones (Peters and Hulme, 2001), the emotional attachment to different technologies (Peters, 2003) and user behaviour and technology (Peters, 2004). However, I was restricted in my ability to use academic theoretical frameworks to provide a more rigorous and robust understanding of each project. When I joined Lancaster university I was given the

opportunity to enrol as a part time PhD student, alongside my full time job, and so the journey began.

Initially, my focus was on exploring the use of interactive whiteboards in schools. I had conducted research into this area and wanted to pursue it looking at why some teachers resisted using this technology. At the same time I was embarking on a new role as project manager for the LEAD programme which provided leadership development for small business owner-managers. Project managing LEAD was all consuming and it was on my mind constantly. I knew I must focus on my PhD at some point. The project was growing and developing and I was enjoying being part of it, building relationships with the delegates and bearing witness to their own business networking opportunities and developing personal and professional friendships. Being involved with the delegates on the LEAD programme proved to be a different experience to working with clients on a pure consultancy basis, which was my previous experience of working with small businesses. The cohorts on LEAD were developing a level of support I had not witnessed before amongst a group of companies, they were helping and supporting each other even though some were direct competitors. This was an interesting experience but I was being distracted from focusing on my own research.

As a research and development programme, LEAD had a strong evaluative element built into it, and halfway through some interesting results were emerging in terms of the impact of the programme on the businesses of the delegates and in terms of the more 'social' side of the programme - the strong networks that the delegates were building. A large amount of data had been collected and as we started to make sense of it we realised how beneficial it would be to share it with the department, and a seminar was organised to disseminate our findings. We talked about the networks, the impact LEAD had on the different businesses, how our assumptions of SME learning had been challenged, about the enjoyable experience of being part of LEAD, the hard work, the friendships that were blossoming and the stories the participants were telling. During the seminar one of my colleagues asked me why I wasn't researching LEAD for my PhD. The conversation unfolded something like this:

“You have so much data here. I’ve never understood why you are not doing your PhD on LEAD.”

I immediately balked at this responding:

“LEAD is about leadership and business growth, my research is about how people work together and collaborate and how they are using the technology as part of this. LEAD is about leadership, my PhD is not about leadership.”

To which my colleague responded:

“But the online forum is a technology and doesn’t it help them to work together and collaborate?”

Although this response now seems absurd, I was so focused on the fact that I could not see beyond LEAD as being about leadership that I said:

“Yes, they do use a forum, but I don’t want to do my research on leadership.”

I wondered why my colleague would want me to research something I was not academically passionate about. My focus definitely was not leadership. “No”, I thought, I’ll carry on thinking about finding a group of people using a technology. I’ll go back to the teachers and interactive whiteboards.

I was very aware that time was marching on both for LEAD and for my research focus. I knew how pressing finding my focus was. I dismissed this brief conversation but something niggled deep inside of me. Was there any way of combining my role in LEAD with my PhD rather than keeping them separate? I did not think so. I started thinking about why I wanted to do a PhD and engaged with the literature about technology and society. I reflected on my previous job in the commercial sector and how interesting I found Internet use and the impact this had on individual people; additionally, all my writing then had been about how people were using and making sense of the Internet. So, were not the delegates on LEAD using and making sense of the Internet in the form of the LEAD forum? Suddenly, I saw a group of people

engaging with a technology. LEAD was not all about leadership, the LEAD forum somehow fitted into the network of the cohorts. I should explore this. The LEAD delegates were actively engaging with the LEAD forum and it was working. It could be that this was the reason that I had not noticed it; the technology had become invisible to me. I could now see how my day job could relate to my research aims! I would explore how the LEAD forum is used by a group of people who were working and learning together. Until I engaged with the networked learning literature I had not explicitly realised that LEAD had, with its collaborative approach to learning and participative pedagogy, been set up according to the principles of networked learning (see E-Quality Network, 2002).

This outline above serves to give a sense of *why* I became interested in my topic and how I came to focus on LEAD as a networked learning programme as the research focus. In the next part of this chapter I focus on methodological approach and methods of data collection.

#### **6.4 Methodological approach**

This study explores the learning process in networked learning through qualitative, interpretive approaches. I advocate that a qualitative approach is needed in order to understand the meanings and nuances associated with the learning experiences which, I argue, are socially constructed. As a research manager I was trained both in qualitative and quantitative methods. I found that I gained more insight into people's behaviours using qualitative methods which provided a deeper and richer understanding of the interviewees' own experiences. Stanley and Wise (1993) argue that the researcher's self and experience cannot be left behind. My own research history from the commercial sector influenced my thinking and approach to this study. Many writers on qualitative research comment that researchers adopting a qualitative perspective are concerned with understanding the individual's perceptions of the world (Bell, 1999, p.7). I have opted to conduct a qualitative study on the basis that this is the most appropriate way of addressing my research aims. Additionally, I argue that it fits well with my ontological perspective of how knowledge is constructed. Merriam and Associates (2002, p.3) note that the key to understanding qualitative



research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world. Further, she argues that:

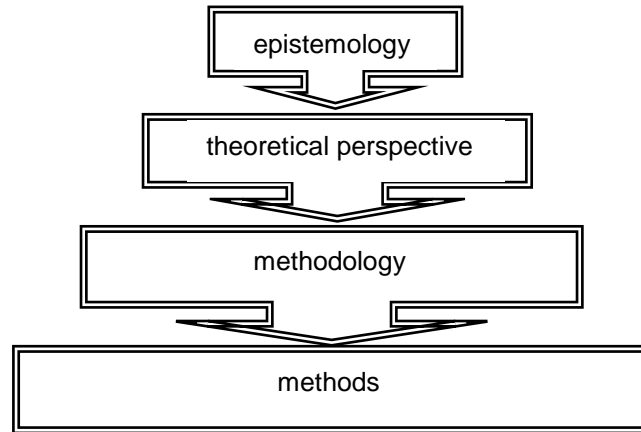
“...all qualitative research is interested in how meaning is constructed, how people make sense of their lives and their worlds. The *primary* goal of a basic qualitative study is to uncover and interpret these meanings” (Merriam and Associates, 2002, p. 39, emphasis in the original).

It is not my intention to provide an overview of the debates centring on the merits of qualitative or quantitative approaches since from the outset this research was conceived of as a qualitative piece of research.<sup>37</sup> Bryman and Bell (2003, p. 466) suggest that using qualitative interviews often reveals a predisposition (although not always so) towards or a reflection of an interpretivist and constructionist position. This point links into my own philosophical position which is discussed further on. Cousin (2009, p.5) highlights that there is not always a straightforward association between method and methodology because different people can use the same methods with different aims and values.

Crotty (1998) suggests that a research proposal should be made up of four main elements which are the basic elements of any research process as depicted in Figure 5. These four elements inform one another and serve to ensure the soundness of our research, and enable us to justify the methodologies and methods employed (Crotty, 1998, p. 2):

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<sup>37</sup> Other researchers have approached these debates in more depth (see for example, Creswell, 2008; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994)



**Figure 5: Basic elements of any research process (Crotty, 1998, p. 4)**

These four elements often do not evolve in such a structured approach. The methodology in this study evolved in conjunction with exploring debates across bodies of literature in relation to technology, learning and small businesses as well as the research in practice. The pilot research and main study are discussed in sections 6.6 and 6.7 where the different methods used are discussed in each. One final area I cover here in relation to the methodological approach is that of using the principles of ANT as a methodology. As discussed in chapter 3 I am using ANT as one of the theoretical frameworks or lenses for the data analysis. In tandem with deciding on using ANT I also followed many of the principles that ANT advocates methodologically. Latour (1999) has compared ANT to ethnomethodology as a way for social scientists to access sites and as a method that allows the social scientist to travel from one spot or field site to the next (Latour, 1999, p. 20). Chapter 3 discussed the debates surrounding ANT as a theory and / or methodology showing that ANT studies have been used not necessarily to explain actors' actions, but to sum up the interactions of actors. Latour points out:

“... actors know what they do and we have to learn from them not only what they do, but how and why they do it. It is us, the social scientists, who lack knowledge of what they do, and not they who are missing the explanation of why they are unwittingly manipulated by forces exterior to themselves and known to the social scientists' powerful gaze and methods” (1999, p.19).

Elsewhere, Latour (1987) specifically refers to ANT as a methodology for description that requires the recording of actors' interactions, connections and effects. Although description is a key part of the methodology for this study ANT does not set out to interpret or make sense of the actors' actions within the study (this is discussed further below). Latour (1999, p.20) points out that ANT was always a very crude method to learn from the actors without imposing on them an *a priori* definition of their world-building capacities. He goes on to say that the vocabulary of ANT (for example, translation, obligatory passage point, etc):

“...was a clear signal that none of these words could replace the rich vocabulary of the actor's practice, but was simply a way to systematically avoid replacing their sociology, their metaphysics and their ontology with those of the social scientists who were connecting with them through some research protocol – I use this cumbersome circumlocution to avoid the loaded term ‘studying’, because ANT researchers cannot exactly be said to ‘study’ the other social networks” (ibid).

Further, Latour (1999, p.21) says that ANT does not tell anyone the shape that is to be drawn but only how to go about systematically recording the world-building abilities of the sites to be documented and registered. In doing so it does not claim to explain the actors' behaviour and reasons, but only to find the procedures which render actors able to negotiate their ways through one another's world-building activity. To summarise, Latour does not claim that ANT will explain actors' motives for their own behaviours; its aim is to record and describe the activities within network building. McBride (2003) uses ANT methodologically in order to follow the actors and the relationships and connections they have with other actors, he refers to this as following the actors and circulation. ANT therefore lends itself towards a qualitative approach.

In this study the principles of ANT have been followed but used in a broader qualitative study that involves an online and offline ethnography, interviews, my own personal reflections and other forms of data such as emails from the participants in the study. ANT is then a methodological tool in this thesis as well as a theoretical framework for the data analysis.

In summary, a qualitative approach is used in this study and the actual methods evolved during the piloting phase and the main study. Many of the principles of ANT as a methodological tool have been adopted in this study.

As Crotty (1998, p. 2) notes, in developing a research proposal we need to consider what methods and methodologies we propose to use and it is justifying this choice that reaches into the assumptions about reality that we bring to our work. He states: “to ask about these assumptions is to ask about our theoretical perspective” (ibid). I therefore go on to discuss the philosophical position that has informed my thinking and underpins this study.

## **6.5 Philosophical framework**

For Gergen (1999, p. 9) the central epistemological challenge is to understand how individual consciousness comes to have knowledge of the external world. Having an understanding of philosophical issues can help the researcher to clarify the overall configuration of a piece of research (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). According to Crotty (1998) epistemology bears mightily on the way we go about our research. Each epistemological stance implies a profound difference in how we do our researching and how we present our research outcomes (Crotty, 1998, p. 9). Through their proposal of a ‘research onion’ Saunders et al. (2000) argue that it is imperative to commence with an understanding of a philosophical perspective prior to developing a methodological strategy. Their recommendation is to proceed from philosophy and peel away layers, progressing through the research approach to research strategy and, finally, data collection. In contrast Crotty (1998) suggests that not too many of us embark on a piece of social research with epistemology as our starting point. Instead, Crotty argues, we typically start with a real-life issue that needs to be addressed or a question that needs to be answered. In turn we plan our research in terms of that issue or problem or question. It is the research question, incorporating the purposes of our research, which leads us to methodology and methods (Crotty, 1998, p. 13).

Regardless of whether a piece of research starts with a philosophical perspective it needs to be taken into account, since as Ackroyd and Fleetwood (2000, p. 10) note:

“ontology is not an optional extra: everyone has an ontology”.<sup>38</sup> My ontological position is that knowledge is socially constructed and that we can know about this through observation of and interaction with those involved. I take the view that there are no certainties, only social constructs. My research then is an inquiry into the way in which social constructs are formed. However, I also accept that there is a reality, a position which I think Knight (2002, p.25) sums up rather aptly by saying: “paying rent is epistemologically real, even though it is ontologically a social construct.”

Locating this in the context of the study, networked learning, some authors argue that social constructionist pedagogical approaches in learning need social constructionist methodologies of research (see Hodgson and Watland, 2004a, 2004b). In this sense the study of networked learning invokes a social constructionist methodology. Additionally, the social constructionist approach underpinning the pedagogy of LEAD as discussed in chapter 2 is located within the philosophical framework of social constructionism. Undertaking an ethnography supports this epistemological position, as Mason argues:

“If you decided to use observational methods you will have an *epistemological* position which suggests that knowledge or evidence of the social world can be generated by observing, or participating in, or experiencing ‘natural’ or ‘real-life’ settings, interactive situations and so on” (2002 p. 85).

I now go on to look at constructionism and social constructionism, where I touch upon the inter-changeability of constructionism and constructivism.

### **6.5.1 Constructionism and social constructionism**

It was not until the notable treatise of Berger and Luckman’s book *The Social Construction of Reality*, published in 1966, that the notion of a socially constructed reality, emphasising the relative nature of phenomena, came to relatively wide

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<sup>38</sup> Even though Ackroyd and Fleetwood are specifically referring to realism which, ontologically, is at the other end of the spectrum to constructionism, I use the example to show that we need to think about ontology in all philosophical approaches.

attention as social constructionism. According to Gergen (1999, p. 47) social constructionism assumes: “that for any state of affairs a potentially unlimited number of descriptions and explanations is possible”. Hacking (1981) argues the point of saying something is a *social* construct is to contrast it with individualist construction of the self. Hacking (1999, p. 6) urges that a great deal (or all) of our lived experience, and of the world we inhabit, is to be conceived of as socially constructed. Hacking also proposes that most items said to be socially constructed could be constructed only socially and that the epithet “social” is usually unnecessary and should be used sparingly, and only for emphasis or contrast (ibid, p. 39). Hacking’s point is that social entities, for example ‘literacy’ or ‘lesbian’, are only ever socially constructed.

Constructionism is an epistemology embodied in many theoretical perspectives (Crotty, 1998). However, Bryman and Bell (2003, p.20) argue that constructionism is an ontological position which can also be referred to as constructivism. I propose that this claim by Bryman and Bell is problematic. Firstly, the literature mainly claims constructionism as an epistemology as opposed to an ontology. There are of course exceptions. Some authors propose constructionism to be an ontology in its own right. Nightingale and Cromby (2002, p. 705) propose that it has the potential to function as an explanatory framework within which we might examine the actual ‘nature’ of our world rather than just our knowledge of such a world. The second issue is Bryman and Bell’s interchangeability of constructionism and constructivism. Benton and Craib (2001, p. 179) note that both are a range of approaches which treat what are commonly thought of as independent, real objects as social or cultural ‘constructs’. However, social constructionism and social constructivism appear to be two different ways to talk about the same thing. Some writers distinguish social constructivism as a more radical version of social constructionism, but often the terms are used interchangeably. It may be helpful to separate the two defining constructionism as the view that meaning is constructed through practices, and constructivism as the view that meaning is constructed through the mind, reflecting on one’s own experiences to make sense of them.

Having located the study in the philosophical approach of social constructionism I now go on to discuss the research in practice and how the pilot research led to a redesign of the main study and the choice of ethnography as the method.

## 6.6 The research in practice: pilot research

As discussed from the very outset the research was conceived of as a qualitative study. Initially, the research questions were more focused on the collaborative nature of the SMEs' experience within networked learning with a particular aim of exploring how the LEAD forum was socially constructed. From that point a number of routes were explored, some of which turned out to be blind alleys and others which were valuable in informing me how to undertake the main study. The pilot research helped reframe the research questions from a focus on the social construction of technology towards the learning processes within networked learning. It is important to discuss the shift in focus and how the pilot research was integral to this process.

A first attempt at exploring how SMEs on LEAD used the LEAD forum involved qualitative interviews with five delegates across cohorts 1-4. The term 'qualitative interview' generally refers to in-depth, semi-structured or loosely structured interviews, what Burgess (1984) calls "conversations with a purpose". Mason (2002, p. 65) notes that using such an unstructured interviewing approach lays emphasis on depth, complexity and roundedness in data, rather than the kind of broad surveys of surface patterns which, for example, questionnaires might provide. I wanted to use qualitative interviews to allow the interviewees more freedom and control to articulate their experiences and to tell their 'stories' of their experiences of the LEAD forum.

These interviews were undertaken in an exploratory manner, with a view to refining the research questions alongside exploring an appropriate methodology. Findings from this research showed the technology to be largely missing from their narratives, it was invisible because it was working (for a discussion on the invisibility of working technologies see Law, 1992). This work also highlighted the limitations of data collection when the focus was directly on the technology.

I conducted a further nine interviews with delegates on cohort 5, refocusing the topic on their learning and communication between the LEAD delegates. These interviews showed that the LEAD forum was a key feature in their LEAD experience in bringing the cohort together when they were not physically in one place. As one delegate put it: "*it keeps everyone together, it is a glue*" (Sarah, cohort 3). Ironically, not focusing on

the technology during the interviews enabled the delegates to talk about their experience of the technology and its relationship to their view of the cohort and their own learning on LEAD. However, these interviews were only a small part of the process of understanding social construction of the LEAD forum. The findings from both sets of interviews were more methodological than theoretical: interviews alone were not going to provide a sufficient understanding of the delegates' experiences of LEAD and given that at this stage the focus was still largely on the technology, interviews were not going to allow for a sufficient enough understanding of how and why the LEAD forum was part of their collaborative learning experience. A series of observations were carried out in the workplace of four of the nine SMEs interviewed on cohort 5 to get an understanding of their 'lives' outside of LEAD and to see how technology in general was used by these delegates. Conducting these participant observations was a valuable exercise as it helped to frame my understanding of how useful participant observation can be in gaining a different insight into the same phenomena. At this point my interest began to broaden beyond focusing specifically on the technology as part of their collaborative learning experience, to wanting to understand their learning experience generally and therefore allowing the technology to emerge as one part of this experience. The pilot research was extremely useful in gaining confidence of what it was I wanted to study and how I would redesign the main research appropriately for the research questions and my own philosophical approach to research, knowledge and subsequently data analysis. The issues that emerged during the pilot phase were fundamental to the final research design. Table 2 summarises the pilot research.

<b>Pilot research</b>		
Five qualitative interviews with LEAD delegates (cohorts 1- 4) focusing on the technology/the LEAD forum.	Nine qualitative interviews with delegates (cohort 5) focusing on their LEAD experience.	Participant observation and further interviews with four cohort 5 delegates in their own businesses.

**Table 2: Overview of pilot research**

It is important to state that while this pilot research was being carried out I was also engaged in exploring literature on SLT and networked learning. The iterative process between literature and fieldwork has led to a redesign of the research programme which I now go on to discuss.



## **6.7 Research design: main study**

I had become more interested in the learning processes between the delegates than on the role of the LEAD forum per se and my focus was moving more towards what the LEAD forum could enable in the wider process of learning. The pilot research had helped me to refine my research questions to ask:

“How is a networked learning community of SME leaders constructed?” and

“How do SME leaders learn in networked learning?” and

“Where do SME leaders learn in networked learning?”

In tandem with this process was the choice to use the theoretical frameworks of SLT/CoP theory and ANT to look at the processes of learning rather than the social construction of technology. Having undergone this shift in focus I analysed the data from the pilot research using ANT and SLT/CoP theory. This exercise quickly revealed that the interview data I had was limited in relation to such an analysis as it did not lend itself appropriately to an in depth interrogation using these frameworks. I was able to undertake an ANT reading using some of the data alongside some of the key concepts of SLT/CoP theory. This highlighted the importance of the connections and relations between the delegates and also the process by which an identity shift took place depending on the stage of LEAD at which I had interviewed the delegates. In short, it became clear that the interview data alone would not adequately address the research questions. Additionally, interviews had been conducted at a particular point on each delegate’s LEAD journey and as such would not be comparable. What was needed was an approach that allowed me to explore the entire LEAD journey of the delegates. It was at this point that I decided to revisit the research design.

Besides developing the methodology for this study and defining my own philosophical position, a number of practical factors also contributed to the redesign of the study. Along with many years experience of running the LEAD programme and developing my own practices around facilitating online learning, a restructure at work positioned me closer than ever to the LEAD delegates. Although I had always been close to the programme I was about to be even more involved in direct facilitation,

particularly online. My role within this cohort would be to facilitate their learning. Given that I was about to become even more part of the delegates' LEAD experience and alongside the newly identified need to follow them from the beginning I felt that an ethnography would enrich this study. This decision was also informed by the approaches used within ANT and SLT/CoP theory. ANT seeks to understand meaning within networks and many ANT studies have drawn upon ethnography to assess the semiotic environment. Additionally, the situated learning literature was leading me to conceptualize each LEAD cohort as a CoP which also contributed to choosing an ethnographic approach. This decision was timely as a new cohort (cohort 7) of LEAD was being recruited for and I would be able to research this cohort for my main study.

### **6.7.1 Ethnography**

Whilst valuable, the interview data from the pilot research was not deemed appropriate in exploring the learning process within LEAD. Edwards (2005, p. 58) argues:

“...if we want to understand learning through participation in practices, we need to examine the practices and what they represent, allow and constrain together with the interactions that occur within them. If we do this, we will get a purchase on what individuals are bringing to these interactions and how they adapt as they engage in practices.”

Redesigning the study to incorporate an ethnography was deemed as an appropriate method of exploration and one that fitted with the methodological principles of ANT. Ethnography may be defined as both a qualitative research process and method (one *conducts* an ethnography) and product (the *outcome* of this process is an ethnography) whose aim is cultural interpretation. Mason (2002) notes that researchers who use ethnography may have a position which suggests that meaningful knowledge cannot be generated without observation, because not all knowledge is available in an interview:

“Such a position is based on the premise that these kinds of settings, situations and interactions ‘reveal data’ in multi-dimensional ways, and

also that it is possible for a researcher to be an interpreter or ‘knower’ of such data as well as an experiencer, observer, or a participant observer” (Mason, 2002, p. 85).

Mason (2002, p. 55) also suggests that ethnography is generally about the study of culture, and is based on an epistemology which says that culture can be known through cultural and social settings. The cultural and social setting for the ethnography is cohort 7 which at the time was the cohort under recruitment. ANT advocates that to be able to trace a network means becoming interior to its activities (Brown and Capdevila, 1999). Undertaking an ethnography would enable me to become interior to the LEAD network’s activities. Additionally, ethnographic methods are associated with an emphasis on process (Bryman and Bell, 2003). It is precisely this that I wanted to focus on for cohort 7, the process of their learning. Bryman and Bell (2003, p. 316) advocate that the researcher immerses him or herself in a group for an extended period of time, observing behaviour, listening to what is said in conversation both between others and with the field worker, and asking questions. In terms of data collection Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) state:

“Ethnography usually involves the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts - in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are emerging from the inquiry” (p. 3).

However, ethnography is not just about the method of data collection, as many writers have noted. Merriam and Associates (2002) argue that for a qualitative study to be an ethnography, it must present a socio-cultural interpretation of the data, it is not enough to describe the cultural practices of a group; the researcher also depicts his or her understanding of the cultural meaning of the phenomenon (p. 237). Similarly, Smith (2002, p. 41) contends that it is through a commitment to an investigation and explication of how the phenomenon being studied actually works that ethnography can be conceptualised. It is the lens through which the data are interpreted that makes

a study an ethnography, as opposed to data gathering methods. As Hine (2000, p.5) suggests:

“The aim is to make explicit the taken-for-granted and often tacit ways in which people make sense of their lives. The ethnographer inhabits a kind of in-between world, simultaneously native and stranger. They must become close enough to the culture being studied to understand how it works, and yet be able to detach from it sufficiently to be able to report it.”

An ethnographic study is made up of a multiplicity of participants’ realities. Smith (2002, p. 41-42) argues that the participants are the expert practitioners of their own lives and the ethnographer tries to go beyond what they know to find how they are connected beyond what is visible to them. It is often conceived that the ethnographer is to some extent a participant, sharing some of the concerns, emotions and commitments of the research subjects (Hine, 2000, p. 47). Being a participant in this sense involves extensive fieldwork whereby the researcher becomes intimately familiar with the group being studied (Merriam and Associates, 2002, p. 237). With regards to LEAD, I am intimately familiar with every cohort and for cohort 7 I would be even closer to the delegates in terms of facilitating the programme. Hine (2000, p. 47) notes that this extended form of experience depends on interaction *and* on a constant questioning of what it is to have an ethnographic understanding of a phenomenon. My view that practices and knowledge are socially constructed fits with Hine’s point that such an approach needs to focus attention on the social processes. Hine (2000, p.42) also notes that ethnography is appealing not only for its depth of description but its lack of reliance on *a priori* hypotheses. This point supports the methodological approach adopted by ANT which advocates general agnosticism towards what is to be studied (see chapter 3). Additionally, it is concerned with the production of facts and the social organization of knowledge.

It is important to note that as a networked learning programme LEAD incorporates an online discussion forum. I go on to talk about how I encompassed virtual ethnography as a major part of the study.

## 6.7.2 Virtual Ethnography

Boellstorff (2008, p. 53) notes that the first recognisable ethnographies of virtual worlds were conducted by Rosenberg in 1992 focusing on a text based virtual world. Many studies that incorporate a virtual ethnography tend to focus on web communities (for example, Boellstorff, 2008; Blascovich, 2002; Rheingold, 1993). Early studies (Rheingold 1993; Turkle 1995) viewed online communities as exotic places which were different to the norms of everyday communication. The context of the virtual ethnography in this study goes beyond online communities.<sup>39</sup> The phenomenon being studied is a networked learning programme which incorporates Internet technology to support the community but the learning community does not exist purely online. Even in the networked learning literature, studies which incorporate a virtual ethnography tend to focus more on communities which are web based (see Charnet and Veyrier, 2008; Krüger, 2006). However, the work of Ferreday and Hodgson (2008) and Jones (2002) address ethnography in networked learning programmes that have an offline dimension (see also Hodgson and Watland, 2004a for a discussion on researching networked learning).

One text which looks at using the Internet in ethnography is Hine's (2000) *Virtual Ethnography*. Hine proposes that uses and understandings of technology, in particular the Internet, are central if we are to understand the technology as an agent of change. She suggests that ethnography is an ideal methodological starting point for such a study:

“Ethnography can therefore be used to develop an enriched sense of the meanings of the technology and the cultures which enable it and are enabled by it” (Hine, 2000, p. 8).

Whilst ethnography can facilitate an understanding of what people do with the technology Hine recognises that moving ethnography to an online setting requires some re-examinations of what the methodology entails. For example, she suggests that

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<sup>39</sup> Cousin (2009, p. 111) refers to researching virtual groups, through participating or ‘lurking’ as an observer, as netography.

in an offline setting we might expect an ethnographer to have spent a prolonged period living or working in their field site:

“Moving this approach to an online setting poses some interesting problems: how can you live in an online setting? Do you have to be logged on 24 hours a day, or can you visit the setting at periodic intervals? Can you analyse newsgroup archives without participating and call that ethnography?” (ibid, p. 21).

As discussed above, ethnographies are typically carried out in a physical space, a tendency which Hine (2000, p.58) suggests derives from the historical roots of anthropology in the study of relatively isolated communities. Certainly there is a tendency to treat the field site as a physical place where one goes. Writers talk about immersion in a site (Merriam and Associates, 2002) and the importance of face-to-face presence in events and interactions (Van Maanen, 1988). Virtual ethnography can then be considered as the process of carrying out an ethnography using the online environment as the site of the research. However, writers on ethnography are keen to note that ethnography is more than the method. The product of ethnography involves the researcher explaining how the experiences represent what Geertz (1973, p.5) calls “webs of significance”. Arguably, virtual ethnography then needs an alternative set of tools to an ‘offline’ ethnography in terms of collecting the data (the method) and reading the product (the cultural description or construction of meaning).

As noted, studies which involve virtual ethnographies tend to focus more on web based communities where the researcher is distanced (see Hine’s, 2000 own virtual ethnography of the Louise Woodward case). The virtual ethnography undertaken in this study is concerned more with following the actors into different LEAD places, of which the LEAD forum is one. Hine (2000) proposes that it could be useful to treat the Internet as a separate cultural sphere in order to understand how it transforms offline relationships (p. 59). She continues: “This would enable a much richer sense of the uses of the Internet and the ways in which local relationships shape its use as a technology and as a cultural context” (p. 56-60). I agree with Hine’s point here as the LEAD forum is part of the delegates’ local relationships with one another. It should be seen as part of their learning experience. Further she recommends that: “virtual

ethnography is, ultimately, an adaptive ethnography which sets out to suit itself to the conditions in which it finds itself” (Hine, 2000, p. 65). I have indeed treated the virtual ethnography as such in this study.

Conducting a virtual ethnography has practical implications. As mentioned, many of the texts on ethnography focus on the physical aspect of being an observer. For this study to be an ethnography I must, as Atkinson et al. (2001) argue, have a commitment to the first-hand experience of a particular social or cultural setting. This would normally be through participant observation, which is discussed in more detail below. Atkinson et al. (2001, p.5) argue that the ethnographer may need to draw on a diverse repertoire of research techniques such as analysing spoken discourse, and textual and visual materials. To some extent the difference between offline and virtual ethnography is negated by the fact that in both cases I would observe *where* the participants are; it is the practicalities of data collection that may need to be discussed further.

Combining online and offline ethnography requires, as Hine (2000) argues, a rethinking of the relationship between ethnography and space. For Hine the Internet provides for ethnography to be differently organized in time and space: “The social relations that constitute the ethnography can be forged across greater distances and outside instances of face-to-face communication” (Hine 2000, p.116).

One interesting debate around conducting virtual ethnography lies in the participation and recording of the events and whether the ethnographer and participants need to share the same time frame. Hine (2000, p. 23) suggests that ethnography can be time-shifted so that the ethnographer’s engagement can occur after the events with which they engage happened for participants. I feel that because I am an active participant in LEAD and particularly on the LEAD forum, I have experience of what it ‘feels’ like to be a participant engaging with the dialogue on the LEAD forum. This resonates with Coffey’s (1999) ethnographic self which is discussed in section 6.10 when I consider the importance of reflexivity. The communication on the LEAD forum is generally asynchronous so it would be hard to argue that participant observation can be carried out as and when every post is made within that space. Hine draws upon an argument from Reid (1995) that (online) interactions lose their ethnographic meaning

after the event; the utterances of participants might be preserved, but the experience of participating is not. Along with Hine I disagree with this argument. She states:

“The ethnographer cannot stand in for *every* user and recreate the circumstances in which they access the newsgroup, but she can at least experience what it is like to be *a* user” (Hine, 2000, p.23).

Certainly, I am *a* user and the posts I make on the LEAD forum are conducted in a different time and space than from those of the other participants. Conducting an ethnography of cohort 7 has enriched my understanding and interpretation of the data. The virtual ethnography may be considered to be a method of data collection within a wider ethnographic project. Certainly, the online and offline observations enabled me to have a fuller understanding of how the SMEs were learning on the LEAD programme. Denzin (1997, p. xiii) contends that ethnographic texts are always dialogical saying: “the site at which the voices of the other, alongside the voices of the author, come alive and interact with one another.”

I would argue that had I not been a user and participant myself of and in the LEAD forum the data (or text of the discussions online) would not come alive or be as open to the cultural interpretation which I have given to them. Likewise, the interview data I collected on the previous five cohorts did not provide a rich enough understanding of the learning across LEAD without the ethnography. It is because I am part of the cultural phenomenon being studied that I have been able to interpret the data and provide a greater understanding of the learning processes. In conclusion the ethnography, both physical and virtual, provided greater insight into the learning processes. The virtual ethnography allowed greater access to the community during times when they were not physically co-located and at many different times of the day.

## **6.8 The research in practice: main study**

This next section presents an overview of the methods used to undertake the ‘traditional’ ethnography and virtual ethnography. These include participant



observation on and offline, ad hoc interviews, my own reflections and other forms of secondary data.

### **6.8.1 Participant observation**

For this study to be an ethnography Atkinson et al. (2001) would argue that I would have to have a commitment to the first-hand experience of a particular social or cultural setting. This would normally be through participant observation. Conducting online and offline participant observation of cohort 7 had practical implications. As mentioned, many of the texts on ethnography focus on the physical aspect of being an observer. I discuss what being a participant observer meant in practice both in the physical locations and online. I then outline how I carried out the observations of cohort 7 which highlights my own influence on the learning processes of the delegates I studied. Firstly, I locate the type of participant observation I carried out within the wider debates surrounding different approaches to observational techniques.

The general approach of participant observation as noted by Bryman and Bell (2003, p. 314) entails the extended involvement of the researcher in the social life of those he or she studies. However, there are different forms of participant observation. The Chicago School is considered to be the main exponent of the participant observation approach in the 1940s and 1950s. This classical approach advocated a balance between involvement and detachment. Table 3 outlines some of the key approaches to participant observation. Specifically, the typologies presented by Gold (1958), Gans (1968), Spradley (1980) and Adler and Adler (1987) are outlined. They all focus on different levels or degrees of participation and emotional attachment of the researcher and whether the researcher is covertly or overtly researching a particular group or setting.

More involved ————— levels of attachment —————> more detached

<b>Complete participant:</b> researcher is a member of the group being studied and observes covertly	<b>Participant-as-observer:</b> researcher is a member of the group being studied. Role as researcher is explicit	<b>Observer-as-participant:</b> researcher participates in the group activities but is not a member of the group	<b>Complete observer:</b> The group is unaware of being observed	Gold (1958)
<b>Total participant:</b> field worker is completely involved emotionally in a social situation and becomes researcher after it is over	<b>Researcher participant:</b> partially participates in a social situation but functions as a researcher		<b>Total researcher:</b> observes without any personal involvement in the situation under study	Gans (1968)
<b>Complete participation:</b> activities are observed in the setting with complete participation in the culture	<b>Passive participation:</b> activities are observed in the setting but without participation in activities		<b>Non-participation:</b> activities are observed from outside the research setting	Spradley (1980)
<b>Full membership:</b> researcher fully participates in the culture	<b>Active membership :</b> researcher participates in certain or all activities		<b>Peripheral membership:</b> researcher observes in the setting but does not participate in activities	Adler and Adler (1987)

**Table 3: Approaches to participant observation**

It is not my intention to provide an exhaustive account of the different approaches to participant observation. I have outlined the approaches in order to show where my approach is located. I feel that in general Gans' (1968) term researcher-participant resonates with the approach I undertook. Bryman and Bell (2003, p.325) suggest that the advantage of Gans' classification is that it reflects degrees of involvement and detachment and deals only with overt observation and recognizes that ethnographers do not typically adopt a single role throughout their dealings. It has been argued that in a sense all social research is a form of participant observation, because we cannot study the social world without being part of it (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

Undertaking participant observation was achieved through a number of means. Following the actors as advocated by ANT resulted in my following the LEAD delegates into as many situations as possible where and when they experienced LEAD. My observations were overt and I gained permission from all the delegates to use their cohort as the main focus of my research. However, there were some limitations in what I could observe which I discuss below when I address partiality. I observed as much as I could that I deemed would not have an adverse effect on those being observed. As director and facilitator of the programme I was already part of most of the learning interventions. I address the need for reflexivity and also the role of ethics in depth below but table 4 provides a quick overview of the types of observation undertaken per learning intervention.

<b>LEAD learning intervention</b>	<b>Level of delegate participation</b>	<b>Type of observation</b>
Master classes	All delegates	Passive participant
Action learning sets	Sub-groups of delegates	Total researcher / peripheral membership
LEAD forum action learning set discussion space	Access only to delegates in each ALS and the facilitator	Peripheral membership
LEAD forum learning log space	Access only to each delegate and me (as facilitator)	Active membership / observer as participant
Overnight experiential	All delegates	
Learning and reflection days	All delegates	
LEAD forum	All delegates	Active membership / participant as observer
Coaching	Delegate and coach	Not observed
Shadowing and exchanges	Pairs of delegates	Not observed

**Table 4: Overview of the observational approaches taken**

Graveling (2009) notes that discussions of the types of roles taken to carry out participant observation generally focus on the appropriateness of the role in the given context and purpose. She argues that these roles are sometimes portrayed as costumes ready to be put on according to the researcher's wishes. In response to this she argues that a shift is needed to focus less on a particular role that a researcher adopts, to how the balance between participation and observation is shaped by the active contribution the research subjects make to this process. I support this argument as I did not choose

a particular role rather I undertook observations that were appropriate for each context as shown in table 4 above. Further, I was constantly aware of my shift in identity and role across the different LEAD learning interventions as sometimes I facilitated sessions and at other times I was a complete observer. I discuss this further when I address reflexivity.

### **6.8.2 Observation of the action learning set**

The observation of the ALS formed a large part of my research experience and subsequent data analysis. Cohort 7 had four ALS made up of six or seven delegates in each ALS. Initially I approached two of the ALS to ask their permission for me to observe. It was imperative that all the delegates agreed to my request, which they did. I observed the first set meeting of both these sets but decided to pursue only one of the sets due to time limitations and also accepting that I would only ever have a partial account even if I observed two of the four ALS. I chose the ALS which had men and women as the other ALS was made up of all men.

There was an interesting moment in gaining permission to observe the ALS which I want to highlight. Graveling (2009) argues that the relationship between researcher and those being observed is a mutually constructed one. The following account from my ethnographic diary supports Graveling's argument in that the ALS members voiced exactly how they wanted to be observed. Initially, the facilitator asked the group whether I could talk to them about my research project and explain my desire to observe them. I was invited into the first set meeting to discuss this, whereupon the following events unfolded:

*Colin says, 'my only concern with someone researching the set is sitting in the circle. I would suggest you sit outside the circle.' I ask everyone what they think and they agree that this is a good idea. I swap with Gaynor as her chair was by the door and there was some space behind it. I move her chair back out of the circle and the set members close the circle so that I am now observing from the outside. I think this is a good idea to sit outside of the set and I'm glad the suggestion came from a set member rather than me removing myself. I hadn't actually thought about the practicalities of where I might observe them 'from'.*

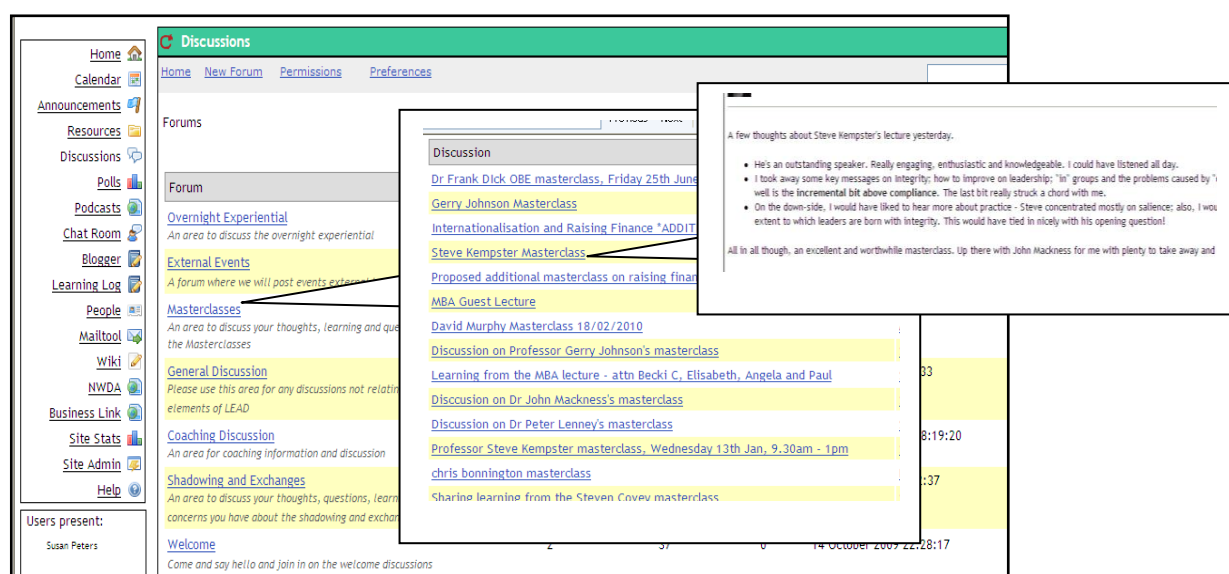
**Excerpt from ethnographic diary, 8<sup>th</sup> December, 2008**

As the set progressed I was surprised by how much the members did not seem to mind my presence at all. It seemed that I was more conscious of my presence than they were. The ALS meetings were very focused and the delegates concentrated on helping the issue holder. They never included me into this aspect of the set, i.e. they saw that my role was not to participate as a set member or to facilitate. At times throughout the ALS meetings they did enquire about what I was writing down and I let them look through my notebook but on the whole they did not appear to be too interested in what I was making notes on. The ALS provides a space to talk about business issues confidentially. When the group established their ground rules I contributed to say that I would also respect their ground rules. I assured them about the confidentiality of my research and I made it clear that I was not writing down anything related to their actual issues, rather I was more interested in how they were interacting with one another in this space. Additionally, I told them to let me know that if they ever felt my presence was problematic they could ask me to leave. I revisited this point throughout the ALS meetings.

### **6.8.3 Online participant observation**

There were three main areas of the LEAD forum where I conducted the virtual ethnography. The first area was the general cohort discussion area as shown in figure 6 below. The discussions were grouped around the different elements of LEAD which housed threads related to the different areas. These discussions were accessed by all the delegates. The second area was a discussion space for the delegates within each

ALS and the facilitator. I had access to the space for the ALS that I observed but not the other three ALS.<sup>40</sup> The third area was the learning logs; each delegate had access to his or her own learning log. I had access to everyone's, as part of my role as director was to comment on their learning logs. I frequently copied posts into my electronic 'typed-up' ethnographic diary, as in the example shown in figure 6. In using these data (forum posts) to present them in the thesis I have corrected spelling errors to make the posts readable. It is important to note that I did not alter anything else such as grammar or sentence structure.



**Figure 6: Example screen grab of the LEAD forum**

### 6.8.4 Other forms of data

As Merriam and Associates (2002) suggest, although participant observation is the primary method of data collection for ethnography:

“Interviews, formal and informal, and the analysis of documents, records and artefacts also constitute the data set along with a field worker’s diary of each day’s happenings, personal feelings, ideas, impression, or insights with regard to those events” (p.237).

<sup>40</sup> The LEAD forum is closed to each cohort, i.e. one cohort cannot see another cohort’s discussions

My research was indeed made up of many other valuable data. During the participant observations I regularly had conversations with the delegates during the break or after the session. Some of these conversations were naturalistic and others were more akin to ad-hoc mini interviews which may resonate with Burgess' (1984) "conversations with a purpose". Certainly, they were not formal, planned qualitative interviews. At times I asked delegates to explain further their actions or reflect on what I had just observed.

Other forms of data included emails from the delegates to both my personal email address and to the general LEAD email which was administered by the administrator and myself. Sometimes delegates would comment that they used email to communicate certain aspects that they did not deem appropriate for the shared space of the online forum.

Additionally, throughout the ten months of the programme the delegates produced many materials, particularly during the learning and reflection days. These included visual depictions of their learning, presentations of their experiences on LEAD, written stories on the impact of the learning on their companies and also evaluation data looking at the financial information of the company before and after the programme.

The main ethnographic study was also informed and complemented by the data already collected from the qualitative interviews and participant observations particularly on cohort 5 which focused on the delegates' LEAD experience in general.

I now go on to discuss the practicalities of recording the data during the observations.

### **6.8.5 Recording data**

Fetterman (1998, p. 114) emphasizes the importance of field notes in ethnographic research, describing them as: "the brick and mortar of an ethnographic edifice." I recorded my observations in the form of notes in what I termed my 'ethnographic diary'. The diary went everywhere with me and became a precious resource for my

data analysis. During the observations such as the master classes and the ALS I was able to write constantly about what I was seeing and hearing. Some of the more challenging aspects of observation occurred when I was facilitating sessions, particularly the learning and reflection days. However, I did have the opportunity to write in my ethnographic diary throughout such sessions when the delegates were working in pairs or presenting to the group. In these situations I would sit to one side and write in note form. At times I also took my ethnographic diary into a locked toilet cubicle during the breaks in order to write whilst my observations were still fresh. This was a technique I used when I engaged in the ad-hoc interviews with delegates during breaks as discussed above. To observe the ALS in particular and to be able to record my observations whilst sitting and observing felt like a luxury in comparison to these other types of observations.

After each observation I ensured that I typed up my notes into more comprehensive sentences and accounts of what I had just observed in order to present what Geertz (1973) terms 'thick description'. I made sure that I did this as soon as possible so as to keep the accounts as fresh as possible. I also complemented my observations with other forms of data such as emails from the delegates, posts on the LEAD forum, my own reflections, slides from the master classes and posters and other materials that the delegates created from the sessions. These were all gathered and typed up into an electronic form of my ethnographic diary. This process was enormously taxing on top of my full time job but I felt it was imperative to be close to the data and to also have a fuller account of my observations. There was one incident that occurred that made me realise just how valuable the decision to type everything up was. I had finished typing up my observations of the day one evening and my ethnographic (physical) diary was on my desk in my home study. That night there were severe gales and a lot of rain water had leaked through the velux window all over my desk and onto my ethnographic diary, turning it into a pile of very soggy paper. Although it did eventually dry out the words were unreadable and I was very grateful for my electronic equivalent.

As with any ethnography the researcher cannot claim to be 'everywhere all the time', or to record everything that happens within a particular group or context, a point which I now go on to discuss.



### **6.8.6 Partiality and the presence of the researcher**

The pedagogy of LEAD is designed to provide spaces to alleviate the feelings of isolation experienced by owner-managers of SMEs. These spaces enable leadership learning to take place. Some spaces are publicly shared across the group whilst others are private and confidential between the delegates and the facilitator. Two examples of this include the one-to-one coaching and the ALS. Although I maintain quality assurance on these elements of LEAD, as director and researcher I do not have access to either of these spaces. Coaching takes place face-to-face and over the phone with a professional business coach. Although there is a space on the LEAD forum for coaching discussion to take place, it is rarely used by the delegates, as coaching is seen to be private and confidential between coach and delegate. The ALS however do have a space on the LEAD forum which is only open to each set member and the facilitator, i.e. the delegate only has access to the online space of their own set and not anyone else's. I only had access to the ALS discussion forum that I observed and not the other ALS. It was unrealistic to think that I would ever be able to observe every aspect of LEAD, for example I deemed that observing the coaching sessions would have an adverse effect on the learning experience.

A second aspect of observation is the presence of the researcher. Ely et al. (1991, p.47) suggest that through the act of even the most unobtrusive observation, the observer can alter the phenomenon being studied. Stanley and Wise (1993, p.6) argue that the researcher is an active presence, an agent in research whose own self and experience cannot be left behind. My observations were conducted overtly. As I was part of their LEAD experience I argue that they were conducted in a naturalistic way. In terms of presence in the online observations I was able to observe the posts at any time of the day. Hine (2000) suggests that ethnographers in cyberspace can lurk in a way that face-to-face ethnographers cannot readily achieve. However, there are some ethical issues which need to be considered in relation to researching the practices online for the LEAD delegates.

## 6.9 The role of ethics and giving back

There are two areas of ethics which are relevant to my research, firstly, confidentiality and use of information, and secondly, my role within the research. Across the pilot study and ethnography of the main study I received informed consent from all the delegates. The British Sociological Association (2002, p.3) advocate that:

“As far as possible participation in sociological research should be based on the freely given informed consent of those studied. This implies a responsibility on the sociologist to explain in appropriate detail, and in terms meaningful to participants, what the research is about, who is undertaking and financing it, why it is being undertaken, and how it is to be disseminated and used.”

The pilot research predominantly involved interviews which were recorded. I discussed issues of confidentiality with each of the interviewees and explained how the research would be used. In terms of the influence and potential intrusion of the tape recorder much has been written (Saunders et al., 2000; Mason 2002; Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). All interviewees gave consent for the tape recorder to be used and did not appear to mind being recorded. This may not mitigate the influence of the recording device but I felt that note taking would be more noticeable and intrusive.

I also followed the ethical guidelines set out by Lancaster university<sup>41</sup> and made sure that I addressed the following for both the pilot and main study:

- **what** the research is about;
- **why** it is being conducted;
- **who** it is being conducted for and **who** is funding it;
- **what** the purpose of the study is and **what** will happen to the results;
- **where** the results will appear and **who** is likely to have access to them;
- **what** will be expected of them if they agree to participate and **how** long their participation will take;

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<sup>41</sup> <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/researchethics/index.html>

- **what** anonymity and confidentiality mean in practice and an understanding that the participant:
  - does not *have* to participate; and
  - having agreed to participate can withdraw any time without detriment.

However, sometimes these guidelines were problematic in relation to the ethnography. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 210) note: “ethnographers can rarely tell *all* the people they are studying *everything* about the research.” This may be because the researcher does not know where the research will take him / her or that insisting on telling people about research when they are not involved may be intrusive. This latter point is relevant to the master classes I observed to which the delegates frequently brought members from their own companies. On such occasions I decided not to constantly tell every person that I was carrying out observations largely because this was not practically possible and also because I did not want to alter the dynamics of a ‘typical’ master class for the cohort I was observing.

For cohort 7 I discussed the aims of my research at their induction day and asked for permission to be part of their LEAD journey as a researcher. I followed this up with an email to which I received many responses from the delegates telling me that they were looking forward to being part of my study. I have used pseudonyms for all the participants in the pilot and main study and I have chosen to represent the online forum posts by text only with a pseudonym rather than taking the post in its original context, which would have the delegates’ photos attached to it.

The role of trust lies at the heart of any ethical issues in any piece of research. As director of the programme, I am integral to the experience that the delegates have. Issues of trust and learning are regularly addressed throughout the programme and are sometimes built into the learning contracts that are developed on the overnight experiential or the ground rules for the ALS. For the delegates in the pilot research and the main study I had a dual identity as director of the programme and researcher and I felt I had a responsibility to negotiate these identities. One of the hardest aspects of this multiplicity was knowing when to intervene as director and when to be silent as researcher. I was tested on this on a number of occasions during the ALS in particular. Grills (1994, p. 164) addresses this saying that non-intervention may be unpalatable to

the researcher but Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p.229) caution that intervention might make the situation worse. There were many times when I could have contributed to the discussions in the ALS with some practical knowledge I had that could help with an issue. However, I respected the opportunity they gave me as researcher/observer and ultimately I had to approach such circumstances thinking that I would not normally witness this aspect of LEAD and therefore I felt I must not interfere. This fits with Cousin's (2009, p.25) 'do no harm' principle whereby any research intervention should not disadvantage or privilege a group.

I appreciated all the help and support from the LEAD delegates particularly those on cohort 7. It goes without saying that the research could not have been conducted without the delegates and I believe that the process of research is reciprocal. Thus I wanted to give those involved in my studies the opportunity to learn about how I was using the data. Throughout the ten months I talked to the delegates about my research and I invited them to read and feedback on conference papers that I was producing using the data from my observations. Many of the delegates gave me feedback, an example of which can be seen in the following email:

*Hi Sue*

*Had a good read of your paper and found it fascinating! I suppose the interesting thing about this CoP (LEAD) is that none of us have the same technical expertise or qualifications but have business management / entrepreneurship as the common thread. It would be a very different ALS if I was in a group of recruitment company directors as we would spend the afternoon talking about the recruitment industry and what makes a recruitment company profitable. You wouldn't get the range of ideas and the open questions that you get asked by someone that runs a printing company or a security company.*

*The opportunities for peer to peer learning are extremely limited at Director level within an SME, I can totally understand why your work on LEAD has been recognised regionally and will probably expand UK wide and further.*

**Email from Duane, 2<sup>nd</sup> July, 2009**

With reference to the delegates in the ALS, I felt very privileged to have been part of an aspect of LEAD that is normally closed to me. I also felt that I was closer to the

members of the ALS and I wanted to discuss (and test) my findings with them. As their last set meeting was drawing closer I asked the set members whether they would like to spend some time with me presenting what I had drawn from my observations of their set meetings. They all agreed that they wanted to hear about my own observations. So, in the last set meeting I pulled my chair back in to the circle and presented an overview of my early findings which have subsequently developed into chapters 7, 8 and 9. I discuss this in more detail below when I address the crystallisation of my data.

## **6.10 Reflexivity**

Reflexivity is an important part of ethnography, indeed any qualitative research. Mason (2002) notes that ethnographers have long sought to draw reflexively on their own experiences and perceptions, and to see these as part of their data. She proposes that the main challenge with this approach is to ensure that it is being done in meaningful and sensitive ways. There is a risk that the ethnographer will impose her own interpretation inappropriately or without justification (ibid, p.77). Mason suggests some ways around this which include keeping full records with justification for the researcher's own decisions and to be as systematic as possible about these matters. A word of warning is also offered:

“You are highly likely to conceptualise *yourself as active and reflexive* in the research process, not least because of the premium placed on the experiential nature of this form of data generation... you must not under-estimate the challenge of analysing your own role in this way, nor should you over-estimate your capacity to empathise with or ‘know’ the other, simply because you have participated in a shared setting as part of your research practice” (Mason, 2002, p. 86, emphasis in the original).

Reflexivity can be seen as the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher (see Cunliffe, 2004). I tried to be reflexive in the research process, the data collection and analysis. I kept a learning log in addition to my ethnographic diary where I noted my thoughts and reflections of the research process. I strived to ensure that reflexivity

was built into the fieldwork. During each observation I frequently made notes which alluded to how I was feeling about the context and the self awareness I encountered by being present during the different types of observations. When I typed up my ethnographic diary I also used my learning log to add to my observations in order to enrich the nature of the experience and knowledge constructed during the process. I would read my ethnographic diary and learning log each evening and try to be critically reflective on my observations and my own 'conceptual baggage' (Kirby and McKenna, 1989). Much time is spent on LEAD trying to encourage the delegates to engage with critical thinking. Critical thinking is a self-guided, self-disciplined thinking which attempts to reason at the highest level of quality in a fair-minded way (Elder, 2007). I try to be critically reflective in my general thinking and have made a conscious effort to be critically reflective about my research.

Many writers on qualitative research and ethnography in particular call for the researcher to take note of who they are and any bias or interest he or she has. Stanley and Wise (1993) suggest that any epistemology which fails to recognise the 'intellectual autobiography' of researchers and analysts is deeply flawed. Addressing these points, particularly in ethnography, can be dealt with through understanding what Coffey (1999, 2002) terms the 'ethnographic self' or the 'researcher-self'. This, Coffey (2002, p. 313) suggests, is when the researcher's self becomes a source of reflection and re-examination; to be written about, challenged and, in some instances celebrated. Similarly, Krenske (2002, p. 285) argues that the identification of the researcher's self within research texts acts to improve validity by demonstrating how data collection and data analysis may have been affected by the researcher's subjective reality. Additionally she argues that the explication of the researcher's self is an integral component in the research process (ibid). It is this gesture that acknowledges research is always accomplished through the subjective medium of the researcher. With my dual position of director/researcher I am not independent from the participants' experiences. Easterby-Smith et al. (2002) comment on the choice the researcher has on remaining distanced from, or getting involved with, the material that is being researched:

“The traditional assumption in science is that the researcher must maintain complete independence if there is to be any validity in the

results produced. In social sciences, claims of the researcher's independence are harder to sustain" (p.43).

My own independence is harder to sustain in the context of this research and it is something that I do not strive for or see as possible. Self reflexivity then is an important part of working with my dual identity. Reflexivity itself is contested as Johnson and Duberley (2000) comment; reflexivity is impossible as it requires the ability of the researcher to stand back and rationally reflect on their own assumptions (p. 109). Being reflexive in this process may not be about standing back rationally and reflecting on my own assumptions but perhaps engaging with '*epistemic reflexivity*' which Johnson and Duberley (2000) say means that the researcher should think about her own thinking by articulating the meta-theoretical assumptions she deploys and interpreting what is observed.

Reflexivity also means attempting to make explicit the power relations and the exercise of power in the research. Humphries (2000) notes that researchers should not neglect the issue of power relations between themselves and those that are being studied. My dual identity means that I could not separate out the fact that I was director of the programme. As such I had the 'power' to influence the delegates' experience, and at the very extreme I could remove the delegates from the programme if they did not conform to the funding stipulations.<sup>42</sup> Even in the daily experience of LEAD I was a factor in the delegates' learning. When I first began the research I struggled with this seeing it as problematic but I feel strongly that this aspect should be acknowledged and worked with through reflexivity. I am part of the co-construction of the knowledge and learning and undertaking this research has given me increased confidence in the participative pedagogy that underpins LEAD.

### **6.11 Trustworthiness and credibility**

I appreciate that access is an issue in any research process and it is one that I did not have to deal with in researching LEAD, in fact the opposite was true, I had too much

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<sup>42</sup> Part of accepting their LEAD place meant that they had to agree to attend 80% of the timetabled elements of LEAD and 100% of the elements which the delegates timetabled themselves.

access. I could remain in the field for as long as I wanted researching cohort after cohort. Knight (2002) argues that industrious data collection does not lead to good research, what is needed is purposefulness. Knight notes: “the emphasis must be on intelligent action rather than following research recipes” (2002, p. 17). Such intelligent action also pertains to the reliability and validity of the research and findings. Research reliability often refers to the extent to which the findings could be reproduced if conducted on different samples (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000, p. 68). This study does not seek to be reproduced on different samples and does strive for generalizability. Oakley (1999) suggests that there is a tendency amongst qualitative researchers who use small samples to generate insights and hypotheses, to act as though their findings are applicable to populations outside the range of the research. The important point is that it is not the typicality or the representativeness of the case itself that allows us to generalize from it, but the clarity of the theoretical reasoning. Atkinson and Hammersley (1994, p. 251) note:

“Much thinking about ethnographic methodology in recent years has been based on a rejection of “positivism,” broadly conceived as the view that social research should adopt scientific method.....and that it consists of the rigorous testing of hypotheses by means of data that take the form of quantitative measurements.”

A better approach might be to consider the concept of trustworthiness or credibility of the research, the methods and the data analysis. I believe that I am part of the study and that as a researcher with a dual identity as director of LEAD I need to work with the subjectivity but ensure that the data are trustworthy and the analysis credible. I argue that I need to maximise the trustworthiness of the data and this entails a reflexive approach. As discussed this study is underpinned with a philosophical position that views knowledge as socially constructed. Hine (2000, p.57) points to the fact that the way an ethnography is presented is neither a truth nor a fiction, but an account of an ethnographically constructed field of social interaction.

Ethnography draws heavily on observational methods which have received criticism in discussions which centre on validity. The terms credibility and dependability are often



used rather than validity and reliability for judgement of the quality of the research (see Kvale, 1995). Adler and Adler (1994, p. 381) argue that observers rely on their own perception and are susceptible to bias from their own interpretation. Terms such as validity are rooted in a positivist approach to research and I argue that such labels are not the right ones for this research to be considered rigorous. One question which tends to be applied to ethnography is whether the ethnography is a credible piece of work. This credibility resonates with the more traditional term of reliability. This also connects with the need for triangulation. Fetterman (1998, p. 93) suggests that triangulation lies at the heart of ethnographic validity as it serves to test one's source against another, allowing the researcher to strip away alternative explanations and prove a hypothesis. One different way of thinking about triangulation is presented by Richardson and Adams St. Pierre (1994, p. 522) who argue that in postmodern research: "we do not triangulate; we *crystallize*. We recognize that there are far more than three sides from which to approach the world" (emphasis in the original). I propose that the term 'crystallization' is better suited to this study and qualitative research in general. Ellingson (2009, p.11) states: "crystallization depends upon including, interweaving, blending, or otherwise drawing upon more than one genre of expressing data." I now outline the steps I took to increase the credibility of my research.

Throughout the length of my study I have regularly shared my research with other qualitative researchers where we discussed my findings and challenged my interpretation of the data. I regularly shared my research and findings with cohort 7 and invited feedback from them. As discussed in section 6.9 on 'giving back' I shared my observations and interpretations with the ALS. When I wrote conference papers I gave each delegate a copy and asked them to comment and urged them to challenge my findings. Merriam and Associates (2002, p. 26) suggest that 'member checks' can be used as a strategy for achieving internal validity. However, this process does not take into account the potential power dynamics that could be present with my dual identity of director/researcher. I have also presented my research at a number of conferences and also at departmental seminars. Additionally, LEAD has been rolled out across the Northwest and Wales to 14 other educational providers.<sup>43</sup> My role in this

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<sup>43</sup> See <http://www.businesslinknw.co.uk/Beagoodleader/LEAD/Pages/default.aspx>

network is to facilitate quarterly two-day learning and reflection sessions. I used this as an opportunity to test my research findings on this network and to see whether they could identify with my findings and whether they could find evidence of similar experiences with their own cohorts. This process was incredibly useful and it was evident that my findings resonated with their experiences. Shortly after one of these sessions I received the following email which shows the usefulness of my findings for this provider:

*Hi Sue*

*I enjoyed your thoughts on Learning Spaces. We had an L&R [learning and reflection] day last Thursday so [facilitator] and I had our radar on for observing evidence of the different Learning Spaces. I was also on a mission to keeping the Forum usage up!*

*One thing that came through loud and clear was the evidence of the peer-to-peer learning, as many of them mentioned this in presentations they gave and also on the Forum afterwards – one of them even suggested that “learning from each other” should be included as one of the LEAD elements. We mentioned that the elements were designed so that if one part was removed this would be detrimental to the whole programme – and they seemed to take that idea on board.*

*[Facilitator] and I could observe the other Learning Spaces unfolding before our eyes and it was useful to understand this. We let them have an extra long coffee break because they seemed to be enjoying the social space so much!*

*So all in all our day went really well – so thanks for the input at the provider meeting. I think keeping reminding us how the whole process is designed to work is an important aspect of the provider network and our own learning as LEAD providers.*

**Email from a LEAD provider, 7<sup>th</sup> July 2010**

I do not think that these approaches totally ensure that my data and analysis are reliable in the more traditional form but I do think that they help in increasing credibility and trustworthiness. I cannot escape the fact that my assumptions and my own research history affect the way I recorded and interpreted of the data. However, these processes do ensure that I have tried to be open with the data and open to different interpretations.

In writing this thesis and striving to be what Cunliffe (2004) terms a “reflexive practitioner” my own practice has changed. In a sense the influence of being reflexive and undertaking this research has resulted in elements of action research although this was not its original purpose. Action research is always geared to make a difference or improve practice rather than to produce theory (see Hammersley, 2004). This study has helped me understand better the learning processes of the LEAD delegates, which has impacted on how I facilitate the programme. As mentioned, it has given me increased confidence in understanding what the delegates are experiencing and more importantly, why. I have used this practically in subsequent programmes that I have run in which I have made the social theory of learning more explicit to the delegates in an attempt to help them understand why this learning experience is different from other traditional forms of teaching.

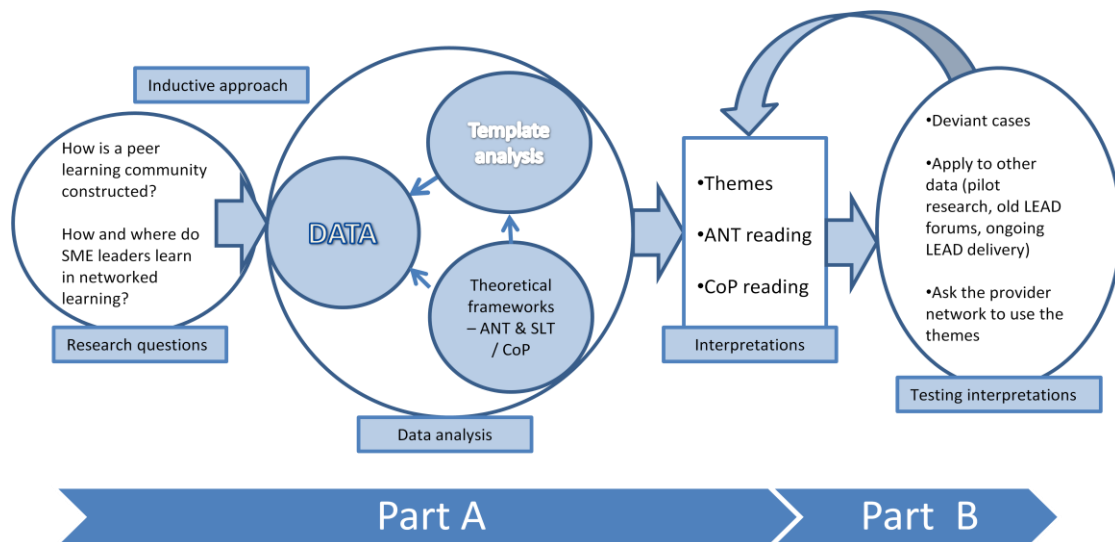
I now move on the final part of this chapter which outlines the data analysis.

## **6.12 Theoretical Frameworks and Data Analysis**

This research is inductive in nature which meant that the data analysis is concerned with theory generation rather than theory testing. The data analysis was underpinned by a process which Cousin (2007) argues involves thinking *with* the data.<sup>44</sup> Figure 7 below summarise the process of data analysis which I go on to explain, following the arrow at the bottom with parts A and B.

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<sup>44</sup> Cousin (2007, p. 3).notes: “This would mean refusing the claim that truths derive from thinking from the data, as if an inert pile of interview data, field notes or statistics had the agency to yield truth independently of human intervention”.



**Figure 7: Summary of data analysis**

*Part A*

The research questions were explored through a qualitative methodology using ethnography and interviews as discussed. The data took the form of detailed typed up notes from my ethnographic diary, interview transcripts and other secondary data. The analysis of the data was approached inductively. Generally an inductive stance advocates that theory is the outcome of research. Bryman and Bell (2003, p.14) argue: “the process of induction involves drawing generalizable inferences out of observations”. The process of analysing and interpreting the data was an iterative one that involved moving between the fieldwork and literature on different theoretical perspectives. Each informed the other. This process was not straightforward and I found myself exploring many blind alleys. However, the theoretical frameworks of ANT and SLT/CoP theory have been used together in the analysis and I argue that together they increase our understanding of how and where SME leaders learn in networked learning. ANT can be seen as a set of concepts or ideas which provide a sensitising tool for interpreting data (McBride, 2003). Similarly, Hodgson (2009, p. 131) notes:

“The theories and concepts associated with SLT and CoPs are undoubtedly helpful for analysing, examining and understanding the process of collaborative learning.”

I have used ANT and SLT/CoP theory as theoretical concepts which helped approach the data. In using these frameworks I asked these broad questions to explore the data:

- What were the processes involved in the construction of the learning community?
- What processes were going on in the delegates' learning?
- How was knowledge / learning happening?

From this process a number of themes emerged which led to me using a more systematic approach of template analysis as well as the lenses of ANT and CoP. Template analysis refers to a particular way of thematically analysing qualitative data. The process involves a coding “template” which summarises themes identified as important in the data and organises them in a meaningful and useful manner. Themes are features which the researcher sees as relevant to the research question. Coding is the process of identifying themes in accounts and attaching labels (codes) to index them. I took an inductive approach and underwent iterations of modifying and applying the template, inserting new themes and deleting unwanted ones. This involved a process of prioritisation whilst trying to maintain openness towards the data and themes. King (1998, p.127) recognises the problems of when to stop the process of development arguing that this decision is always going to be unique to a particular project and a particular researcher. I made a pragmatic decision that I had reached an acceptable version of the template when I felt there were no relevant parts of the texts (ethnographic diary, LEAD forum posts, interview transcripts) that were uncoded.

Alongside this process I embarked on a systematic process similar to grounded theory's ‘methodological package’. Once themes were identified a constant comparison method was followed broadly using these steps as set out by Glaser and Strauss (1967) (cited in Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p.339):

- comparing incidents applicable to each category,
- integrating categories and their properties,
- delimiting the theory,
- writing the theory.

The themes undertook a process of data reduction and refinement and deviant cases were explored. Since the template is an aid to the interpretation and not an end in itself I used the theoretical frameworks in order to explore and explain the themes. Thus the interpretation evolved through the process of template analysis and the analytical lenses of ANT and SLT/CoP theory.

### *Part B*

Once I reached the stage where I was confident that the themes and analytical interpretations helped to explain the construction of LEAD and how and where the learning was taking place I undertook two activities in an attempt to crystallise the data. Firstly, I looked at the online forums from two previous cohorts (cohorts 5 and 6) and two cohorts that were nearing the end at the time this analysis was conducted (cohorts 8 and 9). There was also a cohort in its early stage (cohort 10) and I explored the online discussions to see how many of the themes applied to these other cohort experiences. Whilst I do not argue that the findings are generalizable across other cases, I felt that it was a useful process in testing my own assumptions and interpretations. This was particularly useful for the concept of learning spaces which is discussed at length in chapter 9. The idea of learning spaces emerged intuitively from a group of themes which centred around space, learning, network effects and process. Initially, six conceptual learning spaces were identified but through iterations of working with the data and the themes alongside writing the vignettes presented in chapter 9 the learning spaces were reduced to four. Looking for deviant cases and testing my interpretations on other data was an iterative process between themes and the ANT/SLT/CoP theory readings of the data and testing my interpretation on other sources (other data and the provider network described below). This is shown in the arrow above the final circle leading back to the box in the first half of part B. The theoretical frameworks were used less in the process of identifying the learning spaces

and I felt then it was necessary to look for learning spaces across other data, partly out of interest for my own practice and partly to lend more rigour to the process. This comparison method did not show any deviant cases that could negate the importance of one of the learning spaces or bring another into the framework.

I also had a unique opportunity to test my findings on the LEAD provider network. As discussed above and in chapter 2, LEAD is run by 14 additional providers. During one of the two-day learning and reflection sessions I presented the main findings which now form chapters 7-9 to the providers. I invited the providers to apply their own experiences to my findings and the two days were spent discussing these experiences and testing my assumptions and interpretations. This was not something I had designed into the data analysis, more so it was an opportunity that presented itself. Additionally, I felt that my findings would actually help the other providers in understanding the learning processes of the delegates and I hoped that it could help to inform their own practice and thus the LEAD experience for their delegates. Table 5 below summarises the analysis of the following three chapters.

Chapter 7: Constructing a peer learning community	Data analysis through the lens of ANT and SLT/CoP theory
Chapter 8: The situated curriculum	
Chapter 9: Learning spaces	Inductive approach using systematic data analysis of constant comparative method to propose four learning spaces

**Table 5: Overview of data analysis chapters**

### **6.13 Concluding comments**

This chapter provided a comprehensive account of the methodological approach used in this study. The research questions build from an ontological assumption that knowledge and learning are social constructions and I argue that a qualitative approach is needed to explore them. I presented my personal research journey on how I came to study the phenomenon and how the pilot research was invaluable in refining

the research questions and focus and informing the redesign of the main study. I have discussed the details of the virtual and offline ethnography carried out through participant observation which was complemented by other forms of data collected over the ten month study of one cohort of SME leaders on LEAD. I have also discussed the approach to data analysis and the reliability, validity, or trustworthiness of the data. An overview of the data analysis was presented to detail how the systematic approach of template analysis was used inductively alongside the analytical lenses of ANT and SLT / CoP to make sense of the data and the emerging themes. The findings and interpretations from this process were tested on other data and received critical comparison from the LEAD provider network of 14 institutions who were asked to explore and apply the findings to their own experiences of running LEAD.

Part four of this thesis focuses on the analysis of the data research in practice and the data produced. Chapter 7 explores the construction of a peer learning community through the lenses of ANT and SLT/CoP theory. Chapter 8 moves towards understanding how SME leaders learn in networked learning, invoking the idea of the situated curriculum (Gherardi et al., 1998). I also undertake an ANT and SLT/CoP theory reading of the data to explore the learning processes within LEAD. Chapter 9 explores where SME leaders learn in networked learning and proposes four learning spaces within networked learning. This final data analysis chapter is more inductive than the previous two and the learning spaces are presented as theoretical constructs that could inform our practices within networked learning. Together the data analysis chapters contribute to chapter 10 which sets out some networked learning principles for SME leaders, knowledge exchange and HE.



## **INTRODUCTION TO PART FOUR: RESEARCH DATA AND ANALYSIS**

This brief introduction provides the reader with an overview of the following three chapters that form the data analysis. In each chapter I use ANT and SLT/CoP theory as lenses for analysing the data. My research project was designed to find out how and where SME leaders learn in networked learning. In doing so I was also interested in exploring how a networked learning community is constructed. The methodology in chapter 6 outlined the approach undertaken to answer these research questions. The following three chapters present the data analysis. As discussed the study is inductive, the intention being not to test hypotheses but to explore more generally how and where the SME leaders learn, using LEAD as an example of a networked learning programme.

I begin with chapter 7 which explores the construction of the peer learning community. Through an ANT reading using the sociology of translation LEAD is conceived of as an actor-network. It details the process by which the actor-network is formed. A CoP reading is used to complement this to add a learning dimension to our understanding of how learning communities are constructed. In doing so, LEAD is conceptualised as a CoP. Together these readings result in three discussion points; firstly, others and peripherality, secondly, co-enrolment and, thirdly, networks, ties and latent links.

Chapter 8 asks: ‘how do SME leaders learn on LEAD?’ and chapter 9 asks: ‘where do SME leaders learn on LEAD?’ Chapter 8 explores the notion of the situated curriculum (Gherardi et al., 1998) and proposes that it is co-constructed by the learning community. The situated curriculum is used to show how delegates learn how to become delegates and learn the practices and discourse of the community. This CoP reading is complemented by ANT to address how SME leaders learn and proposes that learning is a network effect. The chapter closes with three points that come out of the CoP and ANT readings, firstly, community or network maintenance, secondly, enablers and, thirdly, salience. These three points also offer points for discussion which can contribute to the theoretical frameworks.

Chapter 9 adopts an inductive analysis to present four conceptual learning spaces to show where SME leaders learn on LEAD. These learning spaces are presented as (1) peer-to-peer, (2) social, (3) reflective and (4) peripheral learning spaces. These spaces are shown to be relational to each other. The chapter outlines an argument that draws upon the social construction of these learning spaces and calls for us to expand our concepts of space within networked learning.

The three data analysis chapters prepare the ground for part four: a discussion in chapter 10 which presents a set of networked learning principles for SMEs engaged with HE through knowledge exchange and the conclusions in chapter 11.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **CONSTRUCTING A PEER LEARNING COMMUNITY**

#### CHAPTER 7:

#### CONSTRUCTING A PEER LEARNING COMMUNITY

##### 7.1 Introduction

##### 7.2 Construction of LEAD: an ANT reading

###### 7.2.1 The sociology of translation

###### 7.2.2 The LEAD actor-network

##### 7.3 LEAD as a Community of Practice

###### 7.3.1 Constructing a CoP relevant for the members

##### 7.4 What the ANT and CoP readings offer

###### 7.4.1 Others and peripherality

###### 7.4.2 Co-enrolment

###### 7.4.3 Networks, ties and latent links

##### 7.5 Summary

## **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter analyses how a typical cohort of LEAD comes into being to form a peer learning community. Using the theoretical frameworks of ANT and CoP theory this learning community is conceived of as both an actor-network and a CoP. This chapter helps to frame LEAD as the unit of analysis both conceptually across many cohorts and practically by analysing one cohort (cohort 7) in detail. Firstly, I look at the creation of LEAD through an ANT lens using the sociology of translation. I then conceptualise it as a CoP to add to this. These readings describe the resultant framework of LEAD and offer fresh insights to both theories. Finally I show how together these theoretical frameworks provide a more holistic picture of the construction of a peer learning community and I offer some theoretical contributions. Together the readings highlight the importance of strong, weak and latent ties within

the learning community. I propose that combining ANT and SLT/CoP theory enhances our understanding of how a peer learning community can be constructed. This has implications for the design of networked learning (and learning communities generally) which is addressed in chapter 10.

I begin by looking at how ANT can be used to analyse the construction of the LEAD actor-network through the sociology of translation.

## **7.2 Construction of LEAD: an ANT reading**

ANT can be used to show how networks come into being by looking at the socialisation of enrolling actors into the network. As discussed in chapter 3 ANT proposes that networks are made up of heterogeneous materials linking different types of human and non-human elements which are referred to as ‘actors’ or ‘actants’. Actors are “entities that do things” (Latour, 1992, p. 241). A key tenet in ANT is that the stuff of the social isn’t simply human (Law, 1992). Latour (1992, p.243) is interested in “the complete chain along which competences and actions are distributed”. It is through this understanding that the actor-network starts to develop and the social structures comprising both social and non-human entities are shaped and consolidated. The LEAD programme can be seen to be built as an actor-network made up of human and non-human actors. Human beings form a social network not because they interact with other human beings but because they interact with human beings *and* endless other materials too: “machines, architectures, clothes, texts - all contribute to the patterning of the social” (Law, 1992, p. 382). The construction of LEAD brings together multiple actors which is demonstrated using Callon’s (1986a) sociology of translation.

### **7.2.1 The sociology of translation**

The process of translation (Callon, 1986a, 1986b, 1991; Latour, 1987) is used to see how an actor-network is created and how actors assume certain roles within the network in relation to one another. Callon (1981, p.211) states that translation:

“...postulates the existence of a single field of organisations, concepts and interests, the expression of a shared desire to arrive at the same result...Translation involves creating convergences by relating things that were previously different.”

An actor-network is created or formed through the process of translation and all the actors are enrolled into a network by this process. When successful, translation aligns actors' points of view as Callon and Latour (1981, p. 293) point out:

“...in order to grow we must enrol other wills by translating what they want and by reifying this translation in such a way that none of them can desire anything else any longer.”

Translation is a main part of ANT. For Callon (1986a) translation describes the process by which an actor-network is brought into being. He describes a scientific and economic controversy “about the causes for the decline in the population of scallops in St. Brieuc Bay and the attempts by three marine biologists to develop a conservation strategy for that population” (1986a, p. 196). Callon uses four ‘moments’ of translation attempts by these researchers to impose themselves and their definition of the situation on others: problematization; intersement; enrolment; and the mobilization of allies. These ‘moments’ are described below to tell the story of the translation of LEAD as an actor-network (see also chapter 3 for more detail). The approach of translation details the processes of enrolment rather than the resultant framework. For this analysis the theoretical framework of translation tells the story of the construction of the LEAD actor-network.

### **7.2.2 The LEAD actor-network**

To provide an easily readable account of the LEAD actor-network I describe the process of translation under the four major stages as set out by Callon (1986a). The process may appear to be simple and uncomplicated as it is described from a post-event perspective. It has been simplified in the re-telling of the account to ensure that the reader can understand the broad complexities of the story. Law (2003, p.8) contends that ANT cannot be told in a single narrative, instead it should be

represented as a set of little stories that are held together by ambivalences and oscillations.

Within the process of translation, numerous actors may be involved in a different stage, each with their own unique characteristics and outcomes. For purposes of clarity, many ANT authors recommend focusing on a single actor, from whose vantage point we wish to see the process of translation (Van Belle, 2005, p. 149). The focal actor here is the LEAD team on behalf of the management school told through my analysis of the different data discussed in chapter 6. The LEAD team consists of the facilitators, administrators and lecturers who work on the programme at the management school. The management school is used to refer to the personnel resources such as teaching staff and also the physical environment such as the buildings, the lecture theatres, the leadership centre and the training suite where much of LEAD takes place. Each stage of translation is explained firstly in terms of how Callon (1986a) uses them, then in terms of how it is applied to the data to make sense of the LEAD actor-network.

### 1. Problematization

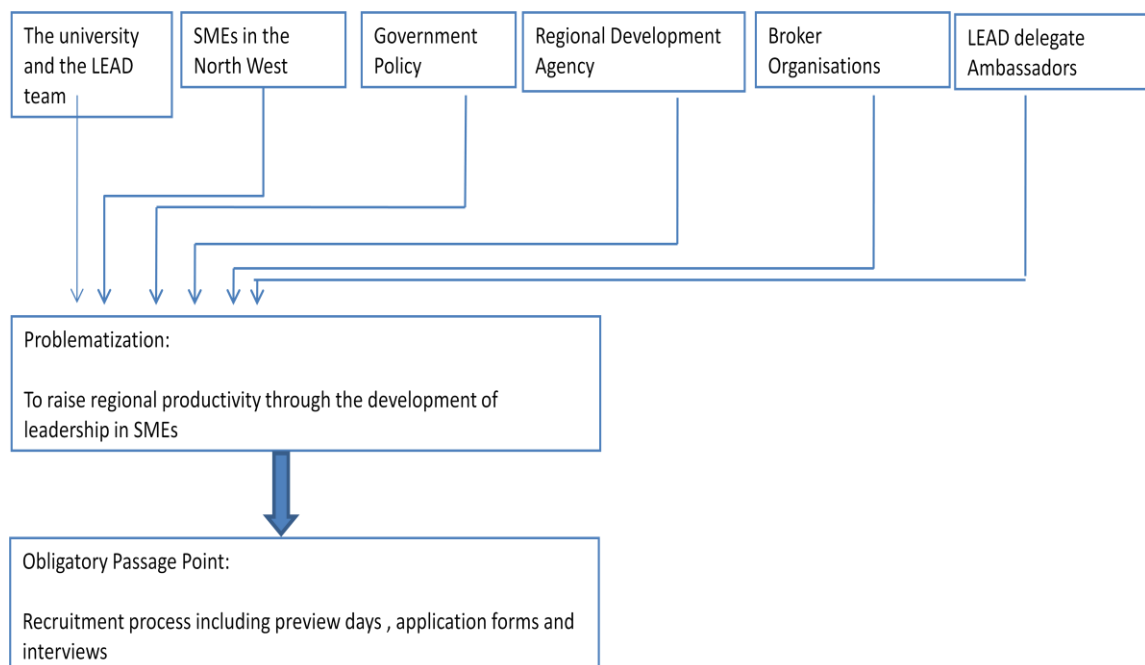
As the term suggests a 'problem' is recognised, in Callon's (1986a) case this was how to develop a conservation strategy for the declining scallop population in St. Brieuc Bay. The primary actors were the marine biologists who proposed to develop this conservation strategy which would have a long term positive economic benefit for the fisherman. For my purposes the problematization is:

*Can regional productivity be raised through the development of leadership in SMEs?*

It is important to note that the problematization is not the same as my research questions which focus on how and where SME leaders learn in networked learning and how the learning community is constructed. The problematization represents the context in which the phenomenon is situated. The existence of LEAD as a mechanism for developing leadership in SMEs is bound up with the construction of a certain world identified by government in which university knowledge exchange can have a

positive economic impact. The research questions seek to address how and where SME leaders learn within a peer network drawing on an ontological perspective of socially constructed worlds rather than the certain world assumed by the government. This is addressed in chapter 6; here I aim to show the construction of the LEAD actor-network through the process of translation.

The first moment of translation normally involves a focal actor defining the interests of other actors in ways that are consistent with their own interests (Callon, 1986a). In this reading I have characterised these actors as obligatory passage points within the problematization, that is, a point which anyone with a stake in the network would have to pass through in order to achieve their goals (Callon, 1986a). Here the primary actor, the LEAD team on behalf of the management school, establishes itself as the obligatory passage point between other actors and the network and becomes indispensable to the network. Figure 8 identifies the actors involved in the problematization. It shows that the LEAD team cannot obtain what it wants by itself and that other actors (including non-human actants<sup>45</sup>) are key in the problematization of ‘raising regional productivity through the development of leadership in SMEs’.



**Figure 8: Problematization and obligatory passage point**

<sup>45</sup> As discussed in chapter 3 some ANT authors refer to actants when describing non-humans, others use actors. In this thesis actors and actants are used interchangeably.

## 2. Interessement

The next stage of translation is ‘interessement’: to be ‘interested’ which is to be ‘in-between’ (inter-esse), to be ‘interposed’ (Callon, 1986a). This involves the primary actor getting the other actors interested and negotiating their terms of involvement. For Callon this was the series of processes by which the marine biologists sought to lock the other actors into their identified roles.

Using the LEAD team on behalf of the management school as the primary actor I propose that interessement is the process by which the LEAD team’s attempt to impose and stabilize the identity of the other actors defined through problematization, i.e. regional SMEs. The primary actor works to convince other actors and negotiate their terms of involvement. A major activity in interessement is the recruitment process for LEAD. For the cohort under investigation the recruitment process involved the focal actor aligning the interests of intermediary actors in order to reach the SMEs from which it desired to construct the actor-network. One of the main routes to identifying the ideal actors for the network was through recommendations from previous delegates for potential recruits onto the programme. This process was reliant on the social capital developed with the focal actor when the delegates engaged with the management school through their own LEAD programme. The focal actor invited these people to be ambassadors for the programme which involved talking to potential delegates and sharing their own experiences of the programme at promotional events. Being called an ambassador in itself gave some a feeling of importance as one ex-delegate describes in an email:

*Hi Sue*

*You are now officially famous in Cumbria as we are in the Whitehaven newspaper. There’s a bit about me being an ambassador so I hope I can do you proud.*

**Email from Alan, cohort 7, 21<sup>st</sup> June, 2009**

The news article to which this LEAD delegate is referring describes his involvement in LEAD and promotes his ambassador status:



*“Andy is now a key ambassador for the LEAD programme and is looking forward to giving a little back to West Cumbria by supporting and encouraging other West Cumbrian businesses to grow and prosper.”*

**Extract from The Whitehaven News (newspaper), 19<sup>th</sup> August, 2009**

This is supported from a post on the LEAD forum from one delegate talking about his experience of being on LEAD:

*I have come to realise that we are very privileged business people to be given this opportunity.*

**LEAD forum post by Adam, 12<sup>th</sup> February, 2009**

As well as using ex LEAD delegates as ambassadors to promote LEAD, the recruitment process adopted many methods including the use of direct mail to SMEs, newspaper and magazine advertising and establishing links with intermediate/broker organizations (for example, Business Links, Chambers of Commerce, Federation of Small Businesses). These different methods all culminated in preview and taster events whereby prospective delegates could come and learn about the programme, experience a taster master class and meet previous LEAD delegates. The recruitment process acts as an obligatory point of passage through which the actors have to pass in order to become part of the LEAD actor-network.

### 3. Enrolment

This is the process of aligning the actors' interests with the actor-network. For Callon (1986a) the actors to be enrolled were the fisherman, the scallops and scientific colleagues. During enrolment the actor-network starts to take shape with actors including humans and non humans. The actors accept their role and interests at this stage having passed through the obligatory passage point of the primary actor and having been convinced by the primary actor, they shape the LEAD actor-network.

The LEAD team designed the recruitment process so that the potential delegates would have to undertake a process that ensured their interests were aligned. Over the four years of running LEAD this experience showed that the SMEs were more committed to the peer learning community as they felt ‘selected’ or ‘chosen’:

*“There is definitely something about feeling chosen. Not everyone in mine [group interview] got through so that made me feel sort of special.”*

**Interview: Trevor, cohort 7**

The recruitment process is part of the enrolment of the LEAD actor-network and seeks to align the interests of the SMEs. Additionally, although LEAD is part funded by the Regional Development Agency the delegates pay 20% (£2,000) of the £10,000 cost. Within an actor-network money can take the role of an actor because it can mobilize a network of heterogeneous allies to do things, to store and exchange value. Within the LEAD actor-network the fee helps to align the interests of the SMEs:

*“Cashflow is critical for a small business.....paying for LEAD sharpened my thinking, you know, it’s not free, this is my time and money.”*

**Interview: Russ, cohort 5**

Fox (2005) uses ANT in relation to networked learning and HE, in particular the process of ‘translation’ in elite universities. In his analysis Fox suggests that people are enrolled by teachers and translated into ‘learners’ with the teachers acting as Callon’s (1986a) ‘obligatory points of passage’ (Fox, 2005, p. 106).

The potential delegates have to apply and be interviewed for a place on LEAD. This process acts as an obligatory passage point. The decision is made by the LEAD team by looking at the application form and making a decision based on their interview. The details on selection criteria are not specifically relevant because translation looks at the process of enrolment and the interview process becomes an obligatory point of

passage for all potential delegates. As well as acting as part of the obligatory passage point, the application form is part of the heterogeneous actor-network and it features again at the end of the programme in the final learning and reflection day, acting as a prompt to close the loop of their journey, which is demonstrated in the following excerpt:

*After I had given them their original application forms I sit down and let them have time to read them. It's been 10 or 11 or even 12 months since they filled these out. They are now at the end of their LEAD journey. There is some laughter from one table and I hear a gasp from somewhere else in the room. After a few minutes they all start to talk to each other and some are showing the others on their table their own application forms. I stand up and speak loudly over the noise and ask, "how do you feel now you have seen those?" Trevor says, "this is a big shock for me, looking at myself 10 months ago. I was so conservative in what I thought I wanted to achieve, I've done miles more than I thought I ever could." Lots of other people in the room agree and there is some discussion about looking back at themselves all those months ago. A few people ask if they can keep the application forms either to refer to them or to spur them on beyond LEAD.*

**Excerpt from ethnographic diary, 20<sup>th</sup> July, 2009**

Returning to the translation of the LEAD actor-network, this excerpt shows how the application form plays a part in enrolment at the beginning, aligning the interests of other actors and enabling the LEAD team to make a selection decision. At the end of the programme it is used as a learning tool and an aid to prompt reflection from the delegates on their learning. Arguably it could be seen as what Latour (1987, 1990) describes as an immutable mobile whereby an object is easily transportable between people but has some permanence.

Law (1996, p. 3) points out that enrolment is precarious; links and nodes in a network do not last all by themselves, they need constant maintenance work. Even before the LEAD delegates officially start the LEAD team begins to nurture the relationship through sending them newsletters with news of the current cohort along with inviting them to attend some of the master classes and additional sessions that run within the management school. Although the actor-network is dynamic the focal actor seeks to stabilize and align the interests of the actors and this is one of the mechanisms for doing so.

#### 4. Mobilization of allies

The final stage of translation sees the primary actor assume a spokesperson role for passive network actors and seek to mobilize them to action. For Callon (1986a) one example is how a few representatives gave the green light to the restocking project of the scallops on behalf of all the fishermen. In this final stage of translation the LEAD team assumes the role of spokesperson on behalf of the management school, mobilizing actors into the network. The construction of the LEAD actor-network includes mobilizing other passive actors, for example the management school finance office, through setting up a finance payment plan, master class speakers, coaches, ALS facilitators and other actors who are involved in the programme.

The translation of the LEAD actor-network may read like a neat and unproblematic creation of an actor-network. Certainly, the delegates who form each cohort are there because they want to be or they recognise it can help them with their own businesses. However, the actor-network does not stand still. Law (1992) recognises that ANT is based on no stable theory of the actor and encourages us to be deeply sceptical about the existence of stable social structure. The entities enrolled into the LEAD actor-network are simultaneously part of other actor-networks with differing goals. This is especially true of SMEs, which are well known for being part of many different networks. This point is developed further in the CoP reading in the second part of this chapter. The creation of an actor-network is not a linear process but one which involves many of these steps being repeated. However, the LEAD actor-network as represented by cohort 7 is considered as a relatively stable network which, arguably, in ANT terms may be seen to be black boxed, that is [something] “which no longer needs to be considered, those things whose contents have become a matter of indifference” (Callon and Latour, 1981, p.285). LEAD could be considered to be black boxed in that the LEAD actor-network is translated (and performed) year on year resulting in more similarities between cohorts than differences, with similar learning outcomes.<sup>46</sup> This is discussed in more depth in chapters 8 and 9.

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<sup>46</sup> The roll out of LEAD to 14 other institutions may support the idea that LEAD is a black box whereby it is so stable and certain that it can be treated as a fact where only the input and output counts.

Analysing the LEAD actor-network through the framework of translation, arguably helps to open the black box and shed light on the intricacies of the network illuminating what was obscured by the black boxing of the LEAD actor-network. The ANT lens permits insights into the importance of the recruitment process as an obligatory passage point and shows how multiple actors' interests are aligned. Conceptualising LEAD as an actor-network highlights the negotiations and tensions between human and non-human actants and their interests. Although an actor-network is never bounded as such because the actors are always simultaneously connected to other actors in other actor-networks, this reading does allow us to see (at a glance) who and what is in the LEAD actor-network.

The concept of translation has been useful to understand how entities were enrolled into the LEAD actor-network but ANT does not help to understand why this actor-network is perceived as a learning community. For this I shall use CoP theory. In the following section I show that CoP theory allows us to identify more fully who is in and out of the CoP and how a CoP can be constructed that is of relevance to its members. It allows us to see how learning takes place within the CoP and complements the ANT reading to give a fuller understanding of the construction of learning communities.

### **7.3 LEAD as a Community of Practice**

*“It’s so much more than a programme...it’s like a community”*

**Interview: Sarah, cohort 4**

Having analysed the construction of the LEAD-actor-network I now draw upon CoP theory in order to cast a different light on the same phenomenon in order to see how learning takes place. ANT helps to understand the construction of a network but CoP can be used to further explain how knowledge is constructed and shared (or in CoP terms ‘circulated’) and how learning takes place. I propose that LEAD can be conceptualized as a CoP comprised of leaders of SMEs and including the LEAD team

within the management school. Chapter 4 gives an overview of elements of a CoP which according to Wenger (1998) are as follows:

(1) mutual engagement

Wenger describes mutual engagement as the source of coherence for the community's participants. Practice resides in a community of people, in this case the practice of the community resides in the LEAD delegates. Membership is a matter of mutual engagement and the term, for Wenger, is not a synonym for group, team or network (1998, p. 74).

(2) joint enterprise

The joint enterprise of a community involves organizing around a particular area of knowledge and activity. This gives members a sense of joint enterprise and identity. Members understand the joint enterprise well enough to contribute to, and be held accountable for it (see Wenger, 1998, p. 79-84).

(3) shared repertoire

For a CoP to function it needs to generate and appropriate a shared repertoire of ideas, commitments and memories. The repertoire of CoP includes routines, words, tools, stories and concepts that have become part of the community's practice (Wenger, 1998, p. 83).

Analysing LEAD as an actor-network through the process of translation has provided one reading as to how LEAD was constructed. It shows that non-human actors such as the application form have an affordance in the network. What the ANT reading does not offer is an understanding of how a LEAD cohort is a peer learning community. Conceptualising LEAD as a CoP shows that the community comes together in a different way based on the pedagogy of learning through social processes. It also shows the importance of peripheral actors through a different reading of Lave and Wenger's (1991) legitimate peripheral participation. Firstly, I address the situated

context of SMEs and the networks they are part of, which leads to focusing on the network in question here, LEAD cohort 7.

SMEs are part of many networks. These may be formal such as Chambers of Commerce, membership to a professional body, business networking events, or informal such as friends, family and other businesses. The link between networks and entrepreneurship is not new as many authors have recognised (see for example, Dubini and Aldrich, 1991; Jack et al., 2010; Jack 2010). Studies of networks focus on the benefit to business (Aldrich and Zimmer, 1986) and are often focused on larger organizations, inter-organizational networks (BarNir and Smith, 2002) and intra-organizational networks (Tsai, 2001). In relation to small businesses there is a general consensus about the benefit of business networks as Jack (2005, p. 1234) notes:

“...our knowledge about how networks operate, their nature and role in supporting business activity remains limited to fairly broad and descriptive accounts. Yet, despite these issues there is a general consensus that networks do seem to provide specific benefits, thereby enabling business outcomes to be achieved.”

Kim and Aldrich (2005) note that people are embedded in social situations that put them in touch with others, such as kin reunions, gatherings of friends, workplace teams etc. In relation to entrepreneurs they say:

“...rather than being limited to a small set of persons known directly, entrepreneurs can, in theory, gain what they need by taking advantage of the wider social network in which their direct ties are embedded” (Kim and Aldrich, 2005, p. 3)

However, Anderson and Jack (2002) comment that this creates a research difficulty in that networks only exist as a relational artefact; their objectification only becomes real as a product of relational interaction. Yet, in spite of this condition, networks are a ‘thing in themselves’ (Anderson and Jack, 2002, p. 194). The ‘thing in themselves’ here is LEAD conceptualised as a CoP. To some extent SMEs may be seen to be part of what Brown and Duguid (2000, 2001) term, ‘networks of practice’. A network of

practice refers to the overall set of various types of informal, emergent social networks that facilitate learning and knowledge sharing between individuals conducting practice-related tasks (Brown and Duguid, 2000). A network of practice differs from a CoP in that relations among network members are significantly looser in a network of practice (Brown and Duguid, 2002). Brown and Duguid (2000) propose that CoPs are:

“...relatively tight-knit groups of people who know each other and work directly. They are usually face-to-face communities that continually negotiate with, communicate with, and coordinate with each other directly in the course of work” (p.143).

LEAD differs from Brown and Duguid’s (2000) description of a network of practice in that the members do meet regularly over time, continually negotiating, communicating with and co-ordinating with each other in the course of work. I propose that the course of work in this context is the SME leaders’ own leadership and business development, i.e. being a LEAD delegate.

Swan et al. (2002) propose that CoPs emerge spontaneously from the (largely informal) networking among groups of individuals who have similar work-related activities and interests. LEAD was constructed purposefully as a learning community involving multiple organizations (SMEs). The leaders typically were entrepreneurs and thus a learning community was designed to capitalise on the typical traits found in entrepreneurs (see Cope, 2005 for a more in depth discussion on entrepreneurial learning). As Smilor (1997, p. 344) states, effective entrepreneurs are exceptional learners:

“They learn from everything. They learn from customers, suppliers, and especially competitors. They learn from employees and associates. They learn from other entrepreneurs. They learn from experience. They learn by doing.”

The facilitators of LEAD may also be considered to be a network of practice. As entrepreneurs the delegates would be considered to be full participants or, in CoP terms, ‘old-timers’ within their network of practice but newcomers as LEAD delegates



within the LEAD CoP. I suggest that this CoP comprises the delegates (leaders) and with the facilitators replacing Lave and Wenger's (1991) old-timers as masters. This does raise the question as to whether learning communities or educational courses could be considered to be CoPs in their own right. Theorising CoP would suggest not; a course made up of learners would not automatically become a CoP. I propose that LEAD is a CoP predominantly because the joint enterprise is that of being a leader *and* a delegate (learner). Additionally, I am drawing on the theory as a theoretical framework to make sense of how and where SME leaders learn in networked learning and at times throughout the thesis am stretching the boundaries of the theory.

It is recognized that bringing any network into being involves developing structures that create mutual engagement and keep the joint enterprise in view (Wenger, 1998). A CoP involves organizing around some particular area of knowledge that gives members a sense of joint enterprise and identity (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The joint enterprise on LEAD is the same as the course of work, the business and leadership development of the delegates. However, it is the practice-based learning that enables them to apply it to their respective companies. Each cohort of LEAD can be considered here to be a CoP made up of different SMEs. As a learning community, each cohort displayed similar characteristics and behaviours. The frequent interaction between the delegates over the ten month period ensured that the delegates on each cohort knew one another very well and had a sense of joint enterprise and identity. The community of mutual engagement, a negotiated enterprise and a repertoire of negotiable resources accumulated over time as set out by Wenger (1998) were all substantially present for each cohort. Along with the shared repertoire across the physical interactions on LEAD, the online LEAD forum was an important part of the community building, likened to glue by the delegates, keeping everyone together.

Voluntarily engaging in a CoP is key to its survival, the SMEs all want to be there and want LEAD to work for them.<sup>47</sup> From the perspective of the course designers the motivation in creating a CoP is to provide a peer learning community which can benefit their businesses.

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<sup>47</sup> This links back to the rigorous recruitment process which is in place to ensure that the SME leaders on LEAD are prepared to commit to the community.

*“The way that I look at this LEAD programme it is going to be a stepping-stone. I am somewhere in my life now I don’t know what to do. I have got the company, which is going there, and I know I want to expand it ... which we are going to do. And what is the next step? What is achievement? Where do you get? How far do you get up the ladder? And how is success measured? By the money you are making or is success measured by the knowledge you get? Where is it? How is it? These are questions I ask myself day in and day out and I want some kind of answers. I don’t know whether this is going to give it to me but without trying it you can’t say. But that is what I want. I want to develop myself somewhere and I think it is a stepping-stone to see or to feel something and think well yes that is the right answer”*

**Interview: Ravi, cohort 3**

The data show that the motivation for the SMEs to join LEAD was to benefit their businesses (as opposed to getting a qualification from an accredited course). Learning and developing their leadership is part of this motivation. The delegates are nearly always at a cross-road in their businesses, wanting to grow it or change direction but feeling they lack the skill to manage this. This is supported from an excerpt from my ethnography diary during a group interview with prospective delegates:

*It never ceases to amaze me how similar they are and how they say the same things, “I don’t feel like I have the skills to take the business forward”, “I don’t feel like I am a leader”, “I feel like I’m playing at this”, “I want to grow the business but I’m not sure how” etc, etc. It’s like a script and this is what they say at this juncture. Mike said he felt the company was resting on its laurels and he knew that he could flex it and get it to ‘step up a level’ but he felt that he didn’t have the skills to take it there. The others in the interview agreed and there was commonality across all four of them in their desire to ‘do something with the business’ and generally feeling that they were missing something in doing it alone or lacking the leadership skills to be able to do it. I have heard this so many times and it amazes as they have got their businesses this far, they are good at something!*

**Excerpt from ethnographic diary, 15<sup>th</sup> July, 2008**

Conceptualising LEAD as a CoP brings with it challenges and possibly fresh insights for the theory which is explored in the discussion below. It can help to provide a systematic understanding of how CoPs operate and the dynamics leading to learning

for SMEs. The empirical research also adds an understanding of how CoPs can be successfully constructed.

### 7.3.1 Constructing a CoP relevant for the members

Conceptualising LEAD as a constructed CoP signifies a departure from the traditional routes of CoP theory which stress the natural emergence of CoPs (Wenger, 1998). Cousin and Deepwell (2005, p. 60) argue:

“If a group of people is held together by external management or teacher control, and if its activities are confined largely to the contractual, it is likely to be low on the internal means by which it can congeal into a community of practice.”

The purpose of conceptualising LEAD as a CoP is to use the theoretical framework of CoP theory to understand more about the learning processes within the LEAD learning community. In relation to whether CoPs can be constructed Wenger et al., (2002) concede that CoPs can be cultivated within organizations but they do not address the possibility of the cultivation of multi-organizational CoPs or for that matter one which is made up of small businesses. The construction of the LEAD CoP is rooted in a pedagogic assumption of the benefit of peer-to-peer learning for SME leaders. Research on SMEs has shown that SME leaders often mention feelings of isolation and loneliness as the most pertinent issues they must face on a daily basis (LEAD evaluation document, 2006). Smith and Peters (2006) argue that with no management team or hierarchical structure, and sitting at the head of the company in the ‘leader’ role, the owner-manager<sup>48</sup> has nobody around them to share thoughts with. Being at the head of the company also means there is nobody in a position to aspire to, and no-one with more experience on hand to ask for advice. The data also show that at the beginning of LEAD the delegates feel isolated, having no-one they can share their business issues with:

*“It can be lonely; it can be a bit of a distant place sometimes.”*

**Interview: Jason, cohort 5**

Smith and Peters (2006) show that the LEAD delegates had no idea other people in their position experienced the same issues and difficulties, purely because they had never spoken to peers about them. The integrated learning model was designed to provide a space to alleviate this loneliness and provide a constructive environment which would enable peer-to-peer learning. Responding to this loneliness and creating a peer learning space underpins the participative pedagogy of LEAD whereby the delegates are encouraged to learn from each other. Chapter 2 discussed the pedagogy of LEAD at length but in brief this pedagogy is based on constructionist views of knowledge which requires the delegates to engage with the ideas that come from the different elements of LEAD and to develop skills and capabilities relevant to their own situations back in their businesses. My findings suggest that this constructed CoP can help to alleviate the feelings of isolation experienced by SME leaders and help them to learn from others in similar situations. The non-competitive community engendered by LEAD gave the delegates the freedom to be honest about themselves and their businesses as this LEAD forum post shows:

*I think it was suggested at the outset that your confidence grows when you find that you are not alone in the big bad world with your problems and I have found that this is very much the case.*

**LEAD forum post by Duane, 7<sup>th</sup> April, 2009**

The construction of the LEAD CoP begins even before anyone has ‘enrolled’ on the programme. The LEAD team spend a lot of time reviewing what has worked well with each cohort and what needs changing or improving. To this end a lot of effort is spent creating a space before it is occupied; the concept of space is developed in chapter 9. For example, the timetable is scheduled to maximise the peer learning ensuring there is enough time for coffee breaks and other social spaces, master class speakers are recruited and briefed, content of sessions is prepared specifically to help the delegates learn how to develop their leadership and the sequence of the different interventions is designed to address the feeling of isolation. In other words, the space provides fertile ground in which the CoP can grow.

Although LEAD is a programme it is conceptualised as a constructed CoP because it displays many of the traits CoP theory articulates. Community maintenance (Wenger, 1998) is an important element of CoP theory and is critical to the success of LEAD. Community maintenance is a priority of the LEAD team and takes place throughout LEAD and, arguably, before LEAD is populated with delegates. This is recognised by delegates who often comment on how they feel supported by the LEAD team. The LEAD delegates also provide community maintenance to one another. One of the mechanisms for this is the online LEAD forum:

*“...it keeps everyone together it is a glue. You meet up with the master classes; people are craving for another get together, something to share to consolidate.”*

**Interview: Sarah, cohort 3**

The community maintenance supports the peer-to-peer learning, which in turn helps with the feelings of isolation:

*“Because sharing things gives you confidence and doesn’t make you feel so alone. Everyone seems very like minded. There’s a real sense of spirit, a real sense of we are all in the same boat.”*

**Interview: Noel, cohort 4**

This sense of being ‘in the same boat’ helps to create the trust needed to construct and maintain the LEAD CoP. Trust is widely accepted as an important enabler of knowledge-management processes (see Hildreth and Kimble, 2004). Within LEAD, trust between delegates is a factor in the generation of knowledge and innovative ideas (within the CoP and in the SMEs themselves) which is explored in the discussion points below.

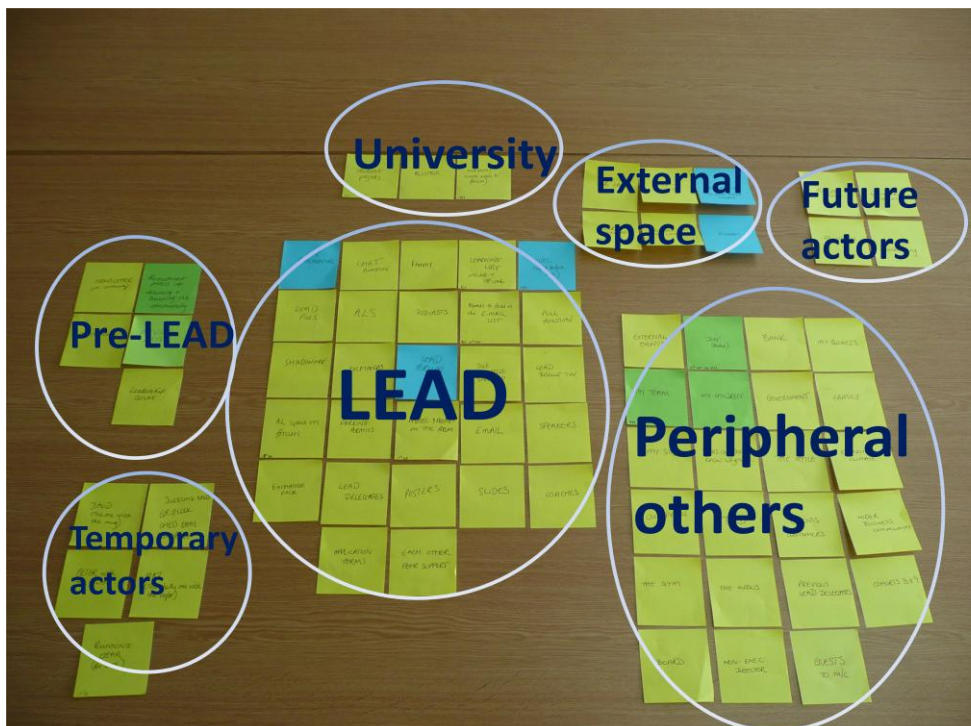
## 7.4 What the ANT and CoP readings offer

In this next section I offer three points for discussion which result from bringing ANT and CoP together to look at the construction on LEAD: (1) others and peripherality; (2) co-enrolment, and; (3) networks and ties.

### 7.4.1 Others and peripherality

Conceptualising each LEAD cohort as both an actor-network and a CoP highlights the role of others who are not ‘officially’ part of the LEAD programme but are recognised as being on the periphery. ‘Otherness’ is a theme discussed within ANT and CoP but, arguably, not to any great length. Chapters 3 and 4 also address peripherality within ANT and CoP respectively. ANT deals with ‘otherness’ directly (see for example, Star, 1991; Law, 2000) whereas CoP addresses marginality and exclusion (see for example, Wenger, 1998). Using the example of the Portuguese Imperialist expansion, Law (2000) shows how a network made up of navigators, the Arab competitors, the winds, the crew, the stores to feed the crew, the guns, and the ships is an effect of its relations with *other* entities (p.3 emphasis added). Elsewhere Law (2003, p.4) argues that all entities achieve their significance by being in relation to other entities. In this context ‘others’ who are on the periphery of the learning community help it to learn. In entrepreneurship the role of others has been explored in connection to the influence of unseen actors (for example, see Hamilton and Smith, 2003). It is sufficient to say here that others (including absent actors) who are on the periphery shape LEAD. But what does ‘peripherality’ mean in this context?

Figure 9 shows the LEAD actor-network mapped out in relation to other actors (identified from the data) which/who may or may not be seen to be part of LEAD. Nevertheless the data identify them as actors and the participants refer regularly to these other actors, particularly those on the periphery. The diagram was created by looking through the ethnographic data, interviews, emails, posts on the forum and supporting documents such as government white papers. An exhaustive list of actors was identified and grouped together in clusters.



**Figure 9: The LEAD actor-network and other actors**

The LEAD delegates constantly refer to other actors ‘outside’ of LEAD, a simple example can be seen in the following LEAD forum post:

*Very swotty to be in the site having a nosey but I like to be as prepared as possible! Adding to that the fact that [husband] is away so I thought I'd take advantage of a quiet night to get through my list of things to do whilst having a nice cuppa. I'd planned a glass of wine but he's supped it all 😞 I've found the podcasts really useful. Don't like not knowing quite what I'm letting myself in for so it was good to hear it from past victims who lived to tell the tale!! They're only a couple of minutes each too so didn't take long.*

**LEAD forum post Mary, 10<sup>th</sup> October, 2008**

The absent actors here are identified as Mary’s husband and the ‘past victims’. Firstly, Mary refers to her husband who is away which gives her the time and space to go on the LEAD forum. The podcasts are made by previous LEAD delegates or ‘past victims’ as Mary calls them. Both her husband and the ‘past victims’ are absent but have a role in the network. Mary uses a learning log on the LEAD forum (a confidential space between her and the facilitators) and makes many references to her

family such as, “*I haven't involved [husband] up to now but I think I need to*”, “[*Husband's*] *fast asleep as I type this*”, “*When I consider I'm doing this 10 years earlier than my Dad's first management role*” and “*I think Mum is right. I am slowly getting somewhere*”.

Small businesses have been conceptualised as learning organizations operating within a network inter-dependency of others including family members, friends, professional bodies and other stakeholders (Gibb, 1997). Jack (2005) shows that SMEs in networks tend to do better in business (see also Kim and Aldrich, 2005). The small businesses on LEAD have peripheral networks which affect their learning on the programme and how they use the CoP. As discussed in chapter 4 the CoP literature relating to organizations mostly draws upon large organizations for its analysis which does not directly apply to SMEs. It is well recognised that SMEs are not smaller versions of large companies and that they extend beyond the traditional ‘nine to five’ structure with the owner-manager taking on many roles. This extended network for the SMEs on LEAD influences the CoP which is different to how other networks may affect CoPs within larger organizations as discussed in the CoP literature. I demonstrate this through an alternative reading of Lave and Wenger’s (1991) ‘legitimate peripheral participation’.

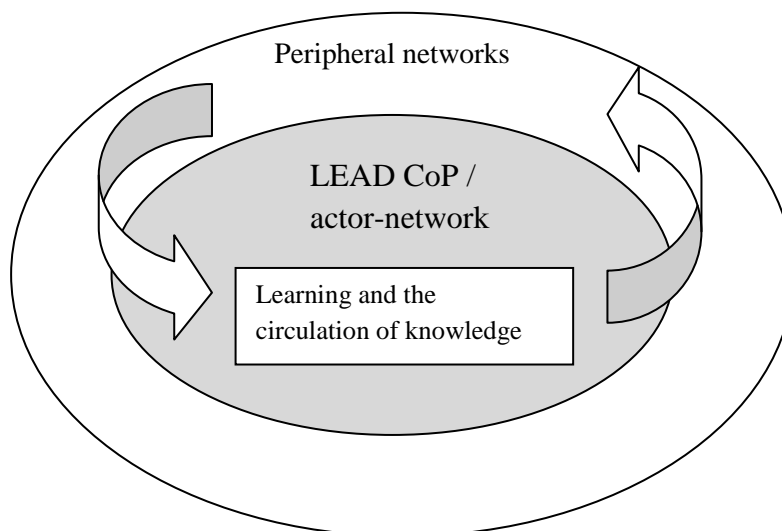
Within CoP legitimate peripheral participation is a key concept and one that is central to SLT. With regards to the inter-dependency of others for SMEs and the LEAD delegates in particular I am proposing that a different reading can be made of legitimate peripheral participation.<sup>49</sup> Lave and Wenger (1991) use legitimate peripheral participation to characterize the process by which newcomers become included in a CoP. The LEAD CoP has boundaries which are known to the members but other networks function on the periphery and enter the LEAD CoP ‘legitimately’ and are welcomed by the members. These include other staff members, business partners etc attending LEAD sessions and families of the SME leaders. These are just two examples of others in extended networks that could be considered as legitimately peripheral to the LEAD CoP and important in influencing how and where it learns. This participation is a different reading to the standard view of legitimate peripheral

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<sup>49</sup> I will explore the traditional use of legitimate peripheral participation in chapter 8 when I look at where delegates learn on LEAD and identity in networked learning.



participation whereby newcomers to the CoP learn from old-timers, increasing their legitimacy within the group and moving from the periphery to the centre as they identify more with the CoP in question (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This alternative reading of legitimate peripheral participation supports Lave and Wenger's (1991) view that there is no real centre. However, the peripheral participation in this reading suggests that wider (peripheral) networks shape the identity of the SME leaders and influence their learning of leadership and how to run a business. Arguably, these structures pre-date the LEAD CoP but it is evident that they continue to influence the learning for the delegates within the CoP. Figure 10 portrays a simplistic depiction of this but demonstrates that the LEAD boundaries are explicit to the CoP members. Learning both within the LEAD CoP (minus the newcomers and old-timers) and from peripheral networks is a social process of shared learning which both supports and challenges elements of CoP theory.



**Figure 10: Peripheral networks surrounding the LEAD CoP**

Figure 10 shows that the peripheral networks surround the LEAD CoP, and they influence how the CoP learns and the circulation of knowledge within the CoP and back to the peripheral networks. Chapter 9 explores the periphery further when I propose the concept of a peripheral learning space but here it is important to show that other networks influence the LEAD CoP. Wenger (1998) says that boundaries are important and it is the periphery where members learn and challenge the way a CoP operates. Even with this alternative reading of legitimate peripheral participation the

boundary and periphery are conceived of as an important place that influences the learning within the CoP and where the delegates situate their learning back in their organizations and / or other peripheral networks.

#### **7.4.2 Co-enrolment**

I have shown that the construction of the LEAD actor-network involves other actors and networks and that the strength of ties influences the SME leaders' decision to join, as well the focal actor trying to align their interests with the network. An ANT reading highlights the importance of enrolment within the process of translation. Within the LEAD actor-network I am proposing that enrolment also entails a process of co-enrolment that links to my different reading of legitimate peripheral participation.

Lave and Wenger (1991) use 'community of practice' to refer to communities of practitioners where newcomers enter and attempt to acquire the socio-cultural practices of the community. This social learning results in practices that reflect the pursuit of enterprises which are the property of a kind of community created over time (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). They involve people who interact and develop relationships that enable them to address problems and share knowledge (Wenger, 2004). The SMEs in the LEAD CoP join the community voluntarily, a key component of CoP theory. Swan et al. (2002) propose that CoPs emerge spontaneously among groups of individuals who have similar work-related activities and interests. I am proposing that the delegates have similar interests; but that LEAD is constructed as opposed to emerging spontaneously. All the delegates have knowledge and experience to bring to the community they come together on an 'equal footing', i.e. none is an old-timer as such, helping a newcomer learn the practice of the CoP. This CoP behaves differently to how others as set out in the literature. For example, the SMEs are willing to ask each other for help, to share knowledge and to admit they do not have all the answers. Indeed, they are often surprised to find others who are in the 'same boat':

*“We are all there for the same reason to learn about ourselves and about business. So because we have got a common goal none of us are looking to sell which then generally means you can bring your barriers down.”*

**Interview: Zoe, cohort 5**

Uniquely no one community member is seen to have greater knowledge of the practice of running an SME than any other member. The data show consistently that they are surprised to find others with similar problems to their own and through their shared practice they can learn from (and with) one another. They see themselves as co-learners, who all have a valid contribution to make to the community as opposed to old-timers and newcomers:

*“So having somebody to discuss similar type problems from similar types of companies means that they are going to have something to add without expressing it as a vulnerability. To that end that is what I like about that.”*

**Interview: Noel, cohort 5**

Knowledge within this CoP is situated and socially constructed by its members, a view supported by one delegate who makes the following post of the LEAD forum:

*Thoroughly enjoyed meeting you all on Friday, wasn't sure what to expect but I think we'll all learn a lot from each other over the next 8-9 months.*

**LEAD forum post by Gaynor, 13<sup>th</sup> October, 2007**

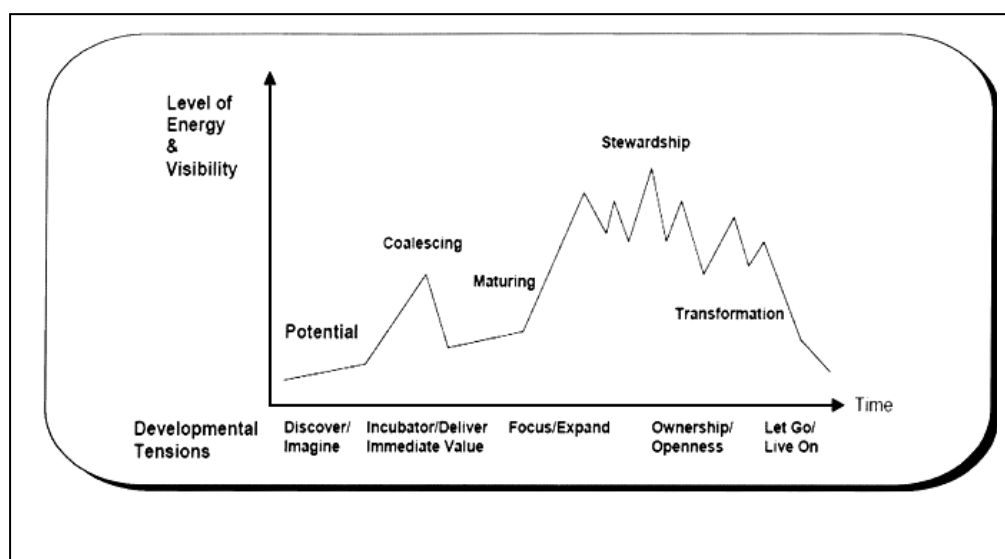
It is by interacting with other delegates on the programme that knowledge is constructed and circulated. LEAD was designed to embrace and exploit the shared knowledge of the members sharing their experience of running SMEs. This practice encourages what Brown and Duguid (2000) recognise as an important element within a CoP, the free flow of ideas, and serves to strengthen the LEAD CoP. I argue that co-enrolment between the delegates strengthens the CoP and enables this free flow of ideas. Although the terminology of ‘co-enrolment’ resonates more with the language

of ANT, I use it here to show that the delegates are co-learners and therefore the construction of LEAD involves enrolment that is a process of co-construction. The delegates help one another learn how to be a part of the network This links to the concept of ‘enablers’ proposed in chapter 8.

### 7.4.3 Networks, ties and latent links

ANT’s aim is to understand networks. Callon (1999) calls upon Granovetter’s (1973) social networks suggesting that we discard his ‘over social’ networks but congratulates Granovetter for reminding us “that any entity is caught up in a network of relations, in a flow of intermediaries which circulate, connect, link and reconstitute identities” (Callon, 1999, p. 187).

The LEAD network is made of up heterogeneous materials, but what is important here is the link between the actors or entities (see Callon, 1999). An ANT reading would recognise the relationships between networks which is something that is also addressed in CoP. In Wenger et al.’s (2002) guide on cultivating CoPs they acknowledge that many communities fade away, losing momentum and members. They outline stages of community development as presented in figure 11 below. Communities, they say, are not born in their final state, they go through a natural cycle of birth, growth and death (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 68).



**Figure 11: Stages of community development (source: Wenger et al., 2002, p. 69).**

Constructing LEAD as a CoP means that each cohort has a definitive start and end date. It follows the seven stages as outlined in figure 11. I want to highlight the importance of strong, weak and latent ties within the LEAD learning community. Granovetter's (1973) strong and weak tie concept has been used by entrepreneurship scholars to show how they are used and activated for business activity (see for example, Jack, 2005). They have also been used in networked learning to understand networks from a relational perspective (Jones et al., 2008). When LEAD finishes, intuitively we would expect that the CoP dissipates also. Many of the delegates will move away from the CoP once it has served its purpose, that of leadership and business development. However, for many there are also what Jones et al. (2008) refer to as 'latent links,' that is: "links that exist but are not yet fully developed or apparent" (p. 92). They use the term to discuss how readers of online posts in a networked learning environment could be considered as latent links as they are an assumed audience. I propose that latent links can exist as something to be activated in the future, i.e. after the learning community has dissipated. The following post is representative of many posts of this kind toward the end of LEAD:

*A quick thank you from me to everyone involved in the course, organisers and delegates alike. I suspect I will look back and consider this my favourite year so far in business because of LEAD, despite all the challenges and difficulties we have faced. I am pretty certain that they won't stop here, but i will make sure that I draw on what I have learnt over the past 10 months to help me.*

*The support that everyone has provided has been fantastic and so important, so thank you and good luck to everyone. Looking forward to meeting up again in the future.*

**LEAD forum post by Alan, 19<sup>th</sup> July, 2009**

In this post Alan says he is looking forward to meeting up again in the future. Some delegates choose to do this formally and continue to meet regularly within their ALS carrying on through self-facilitation (as opposed to having a facilitator from the LEAD team). Others keep in touch through social engagements whilst others leave the community altogether.

There are two points I want to address here in relation to latent links and weak ties across networks. The first is the role of technology and the second is the re-activation of latent links or weak ties. It is common for university virtual learning environments to 'shut down' after a course has finished in that the users are no longer granted access to it. The LEAD forum however stays 'open' to each cohort should they wish to use it. The second point is related to the technology in that the LEAD forum affords the dissipated learning community the opportunity to re-activate latent links. In ANT terms the LEAD forum is an actor that brings the actor-network (or at least parts of it) back together. In CoP terms it is linked to Wenger's (1998) concept of community maintenance but here the maintenance is of a looser community as opposed to LEAD as a CoP. An example of the re-activation of latent links or, to use Granovetter's (1973) term 'the strength of weak ties' can be seen in the following example from cohort 8. After this cohort had officially finished and thus the CoP had dissipated as a LEAD CoP one of the delegates tragically died. Even though LEAD had finished for this cohort and no-one had used the LEAD forum since, an ex-delegate put a post on there. Nearly all the ex-delegates from this cohort communicated their condolences through the forum and arranged to attend the funeral. This cohort has gone on to frequently use the LEAD forum to arrange social gatherings. I draw upon this example from cohort 8 in chapter 8 in more detail in a discussion on community / network maintenance. Guldberg and Mackness (2009) argue that CoPs are not time bound but I would argue that CoPs such as LEAD could be seen to have a certain lifespan with built in latent links that could be reactivated in the future.

## **7.5 Summary**

Using the frameworks of ANT and CoP this chapter has explored how the peer learning community of LEAD was constructed. I argued that combining the two provides a more in depth understanding of how a learning community can be constructed. The ANT reading used the sociology of translation to show how actors were enrolled into the LEAD actor-network. It showed the importance of the primary actor in stabilizing the identity of the LEAD delegates and enrolling them into the actor-network. The CoP reading showed how the LEAD CoP came together in a different way based on the pedagogy of learning through social processes. The challenges of conceptualising LEAD as a CoP lie in pushing the boundaries of the

theory in relation to a constructed CoP and SMEs. A CoP reading explored the boundaries of the network and I proposed an alternative reading of Lave and Wenger's (1991) legitimate peripheral participation whereby other networks were legitimately peripheral and influenced the learning of the LEAD CoP.

The ANT and CoP reading described the resultant framework of LEAD and offered fresh insights to both theories that are continued in the subsequent data analysis chapters. Both readings result in three discussion points: firstly, others and peripherality; secondly, co-enrolment, and; thirdly, networks, ties and latent links.

The following two chapters explore how and where the delegates learn on LEAD. Specifically, chapter 8 looks at how the delegates co-construct and learn the situated curriculum of LEAD and chapter 9 proposes four conceptual learning spaces to show where the learning takes place.

## CHAPTER 8

### THE SITUATED CURRICULUM

#### CHAPTER 8: THE SITUATED CURRICULUM

- 8.1 Introduction
- 8.2 The LEAD integrated learning model
- 8.3 Hidden curriculum and the situated curriculum
- 8.4 The Situated Curriculum: learning, developing, enacting
- 8.5 Challenging the situated curriculum
- 8.6 Learning to be a LEAD delegate
  - 8.6.1 Legitimate Peripheral Participation
  - 8.6.2 Translation of learners
- 8.7 Reflexivity in the co-construction of the situated curriculum
- 8.8 CoP and ANT: what the two readings offer
  - 8.8.1 Community / network maintenance
  - 8.8.2 Enablers
  - 8.8.3 Saliency
- 8.9 Summary

#### 8.1 Introduction

Chapter 7 demonstrated how LEAD was constructed by conceptualising it as an actor-network and a CoP. This helped to frame the unit of analysis as both a network made up of heterogeneous materials and a learning community underpinned by a social view of learning. Specifically, this chapter asks: “how do SME leaders learn on LEAD?” I look at how the SME leaders learn to *become* delegates and how they learn how to engage with the different learning interventions through the integrated learning model. Drawing upon the data from one cohort, I use the concept of the situated curriculum (Gherardi et al., 1998) to suggest that LEAD has its own situated curriculum. I show how delegates learn and develop the situated curriculum, and in doing so, also learn to



challenge it. This lays the foundations for exploring how the delegates' identities shift as they become fuller participants through legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). I argue that they identify more fully with leadership through their identity as a LEAD delegate. The second part of this chapter draws upon CoP and ANT as lenses for analysis to show how delegates learn to *become* LEAD delegates. The CoP reading highlights the importance of practice in communities and the ANT reading shows how the primary actor stabilizes the identity of the actors but in doing so allows for their identity to shift within the actor-network. The chapter closes with three points that come out of the CoP and ANT readings: firstly, community or network maintenance; secondly, enablers, and; thirdly, salience. These three points also offer points for discussion which can contribute to the theoretical frameworks.

Firstly, I briefly recapitulate the integrated learning model to highlight the different learning interventions across which the situated curriculum is learnt and then challenged.

## **8.2 The LEAD integrated learning model**

As discussed, LEAD is a management and leadership programme for owner-managers / leaders of SMEs, run in cohorts of up to 25 delegates. It is made up of different learning interventions which make up the integrated learning model as shown in figure 1 (chapter 1). In addition to the structured learning interventions emphasis is placed on creating informal and social situations such as extended lunches and refreshment breaks.

In chapter 3 I provided an overview of SLT. A key element of SLT is the social construction of knowledge that views learning as a social process. SLT underpins the integrated learning model and the delegates engage with the different learning interventions as a social process. The learning interventions as shown in figure 1 are designed to provide learning that is taught, observed, situated and enacted (see chapter 1 for a more in depth discussion of the design and pedagogy of the integrated learning model). Together, the learning interventions result in learning that is socially constructed, largely through a dialogical process through peer-to-peer learning.

The following sections use CoP theory, informed largely by the concept of legitimate peripheral participation, and ANT to discuss how the SME leaders learn to become LEAD delegates, and, in doing so, show how their identities shift towards that of a leader through an increased salience of leadership. This is followed by a discussion bringing the two theoretical frameworks together in a joint reading of the analysis.

### **8.3 Hidden curriculum and the situated curriculum**

To show how delegates learn to engage with the integrated learning model and how to be a LEAD delegate I invoke the idea of a curriculum. Curriculum is often equated to a syllabus or a body of knowledge-content and/or subjects, with education being the process by which these are transmitted or ‘delivered’ to students by the most effective methods that can be devised (Blenkin et al., 1992, p. 23). Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 93) use the idea of a learning curriculum. For them it is the practice of the community which creates the potential “curriculum” in the broadest sense which may be learned by newcomers with legitimate peripheral access. A learning curriculum unfolds in opportunities for engagement in practice. They distinguish between a learning curriculum and a teaching curriculum, a learning curriculum consists of a field of learning resources in everyday practice viewed from the perspective of learners. A teaching curriculum, by contrast, is constructed for the instruction of newcomers. Wenger (1998) continues this idea and uses the term “living curriculum” to describe how an apprentice learns through a CoP. For Wenger, the curriculum is the CoP itself (1998, p. 4). As a leadership and management programme, LEAD has a teaching curriculum but learning to be a delegate goes further than being exposed to or learning through the teaching curriculum. It can also be considered to have a living curriculum whereby the SME leaders learn through the CoP that is their LEAD programme.

It is not my intention to present an overview of curriculum per se, rather I want to look at what curriculum means in relation to LEAD and I want to look at the notion of a ‘hidden curriculum’ which is followed by the presentation of the situated curriculum below. The idea of a ‘hidden curriculum’ was explored in sociology by Jackson (1968) who argued that what is taught in schools is more than the sum total of the curriculum. His argument followed that in addition to the taught aspects of schooling it should be understood as a socialization process where students pick up messages

through the experience of being in school. Snyder (1970) adopted the term to explain the impact of assessment methods on students' learning strategies. Meighan (1981) sees the hidden curriculum as an attitude to learning and something the pupils pick up. Similarly, Becker et al.'s work *Boys in White* (1961) explores the socialization of medical students looking at strategies for survival, and learning what was expected of them from the faculty. Although Becker et al. (1961) do not use the term hidden curriculum what they observed can be considered to be a form of a hidden curriculum whereby students must learn the social mechanisms and how to interpret situations and respond with a suitable vocabulary (Gerholm, 1990).

I want to add to the idea that each cohort experiences a teaching and a living curriculum by bringing in Gherardi et al.'s (1998) "situated curriculum" to show how the SME leaders learn the craft of being a delegate. Gherardi et al. (1998) use the concept of the situated curriculum to describe a specific form of social order that shapes the socialization of novices within the context of ongoing work activities (p. 275). They use it to describe how workplace learning takes place on a construction site in Italy through researching how practical expertise and tacit skills are passed from senior workers to novices. They are keen to point out that to members of a CoP, the situated curriculum amounts to nothing more than one of the many aspects of daily workplace activity that are taken for granted (p.291). Wenger (1998, p. 83) argues that every community has a repertoire, which includes the discourse by which members create and express their forms of membership and their identities as members. Accordingly, all learning communities develop their own discourse and behaviours. Brown and Duguid (2001) argue: "that if people share a practice, then they will share know *how*, or tacit knowledge" (p. 204, emphasis in the original). Both the repertoire and the community's language can be considered to be part and parcel of the situated curriculum. I propose that LEAD has its own situated curriculum, with each cohort experiencing a nuanced version of the situated curriculum for that cohort. The delegates learn to 'behave' in the different learning interventions through learning, developing and enacting the situated curriculum. In doing so, they gain the identity as LEAD participant or delegate. This is discussed in more depth below.

#### **8.4 The situated curriculum: learning, developing, enacting**

As discussed, the integrated learning model is made up of different learning interventions or mechanisms. As the delegates engage with the different aspects of the integrated learning model they begin to learn and develop the situated curriculum. As discussed in chapter 7, conceptualising LEAD as a CoP calls for a different understanding of how they become fuller participants. Having no ‘old timers’ as such to learn from, the act of learning to be a delegate is a co-construction between the facilitators and the delegates. In ANT terms the situated curriculum would be a network effect, i.e. an effect of the LEAD actor-network coming together. The co-construction of the situated curriculum can also be considered to be part of the process of intersement and enrolment into the network as discussed in chapter 7 and which is discussed in more detail in Section 8.6.2 below.

I argue that each cohort has a nuanced version of the situated curriculum and I demonstrate through my ethnographic accounts how cohort 7 co-constructed the situated curriculum. I explain how developing and learning the situated curriculum of LEAD helps to understand how the delegates learn on LEAD. The concept of co-constructing the situated curriculum was also tested against additional cohorts through my own observations and through the discussions on the online forums for other cohorts (see chapter 6, section 6.11 for a fuller discussion). I provide a number of accounts to demonstrate the co-construction of the situated curriculum. The first account is within the observed ALS and shows, through three different episodes in the same set meeting, how the facilitator guides the delegates to act in a way appropriate to the learning intervention, thus bringing (part of) the situated curriculum to the surface.

*This is the first set meeting after they had their introduction to action learning and a practice set a couple of weeks ago. [Facilitator] explained the purpose of ground rules within action learning and told them they are like a learning contract for which they have responsibility. It is up to them what ground rules they have as they will be unique to this set. The group make some suggestions for the ground rules and [facilitator] writes them on the flip chart paper in big, bold writing explaining that they can always revisit them and modify them as they go along.*

.....

*[Facilitator] goes back over what they talked about during the introduction to action learning. [Facilitator] talks through the terminology of air time (where the presenter presents their issue) and the process review (where the set reflects on the process of action learning rather than the issue). [Facilitator] checks they are okay with the terminology and sits back down asking who would like to present their first issue. Gaynor says she definitely wouldn't like to go first. Simon says he has something he would like to work on.*

.....

*At one point during Simon's air time Gaynor keeps making suggestions [facilitator] says, 'turn it into a question'. She says, 'how? I'm really struggling, I just want to tell him what I think' and Colin gives her a suggestion on how to do this. Colin says that Gaynor may have an observation to make. [Facilitator] chips in on another statement Gaynor makes later and says, 'is that your opinion or an observation you have for Simon? It's okay to make an observation'.*

**Excerpt from ethnographic diary, 18<sup>th</sup> June, 2009**

The facilitator makes the formal curriculum of action learning explicit

The situated curriculum begins to emerge

The facilitator helps the set members to learn how they should behave in an ALS and learn the structured process of action learning. In the first part of the above account the facilitator explains the purpose of the ground rules and the terminology of 'air time' and 'process review'. These can be considered to be part of the formal curriculum or Wenger's (1998) living curriculum. The second part of the account shows that the situated curriculum is beginning to develop. This happens when the set member, Gaynor, struggles with the living curriculum, demonstrated through her wanting to tell another set member, Simon, what she thinks. The facilitator checks whether Gaynor is adhering to the guidelines within action learning and makes clear that an 'observation' would be appropriate and in doing so implies that her opinion would not be

appropriate. The use of the term ‘observation’ became part of the set’s discourse during all subsequent meetings and become an important tool in challenging the situated curriculum as I demonstrate further on. This is just one example of the delegates learning to function in a community. However, here the term ‘observation’ is co-constructed by the community (including the facilitator) rather than assimilating a predetermined discourse.

As noted, Wenger (1998, p.83) proposes that the repertoire of a CoP includes the discourse by which members express their forms of membership and their identities as members. I propose that the delegates interpret their own understanding of how to behave in the different learning interventions, and so develop Wenger’s repertoire which in turn contributes in a cyclical process to the development of the situated curriculum. Wenger (1998, p. 83) also notes that the repertoire combines both reificative and participative aspects - which I propose can be seen when the delegates learn and develop the situated curriculum (see figure 12 and the related discussion below). The following post on the LEAD forum shows that Mary has a question about parking permits and an experience of parking that she shares with the group. She states that she was going to send an email but by posting it on the LEAD forum, everyone can see the answer:

*[Administrator] mentioned on Friday that it was possible to arrange a student permit for people outside of Lancaster to make parking a little easier (with a little walk). Luckily the last couple of times it’s been really straight forward and I’ve managed to find a space immediately in the visitors spots near the sports centre and just paid and displayed but I have been to the Uni at other times for seminars and it’s not so straight forward!*

*Was going to send an email but then thought it might be more useful to contact you on here so that everyone can see the answer - I’m learning!!*

**LEAD forum post by Mary, 14<sup>th</sup> October, 2008**

This thread sparked lots of posts about parking permits and comments from the others that if they use the online forum, the rest of the delegates are able to share information. Although this thread is about an administrative aspect of LEAD it shows that Mary is developing a practice which is reified by the other posts. One delegate,

Jeanette, who, during other situations claims she is a 'technophobe' and does not feel confident using the discussion forums, reifies Mary's behaviour and contributes to the shared repertoire of the community:

*Not got the hang of this yet, though has been fascinating to read the discussions and messages etc. Can you please arrange for 10 parking permits and I will collect and pay at Masterclass, Nov 7th.*

**LEAD forum post by Jeanette, 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 2008**

By sharing information on the online forum the delegates begin to establish a way of behaving and in doing so contribute to the development of the repertoire of this CoP. They continue to share their experiences throughout their time on the programme. As they engage with the different learning interventions they often post their thoughts on the discussion forums; for example, Alan shares how he had preconceptions of action learning but that he now sees it as a potential great resource. This is followed by Gaynor who says that reflection is a new skill she is learning:

*I can see that the action learning set going to be a great resource. I found it very exciting. I realise that I did have pre conceived ideas about what I may get out of the action learning set, however, I now realise that I will gain a huge amount from this process.*

**LEAD forum post by Alan in the ALS area, 15<sup>th</sup> November, 2008**

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*I enjoyed the ALS [action learning set] as well, I am enjoying the whole experience of meeting like minded people with similar challenges and aspirations. It was more useful than I realised at the time. The ability to be reflective is a new skill I am learning following the experiential and the action learning. Also the tendency to be judgemental may subside if I reflect a bit more!*

**LEAD forum post by Gaynor in the ALS area, 15<sup>th</sup> November, 2008**

The online discussions frequently show that the delegates are discussing how LEAD is working for them and how they are trying to put their learning into practice. They

often comment that they find this process confusing and difficult. In the following post, Adam's comments highlight how he is trying to make sense of LEAD for him. He is referring to a recent master class and shows that he was trying to take notes and how, in turn, he is going to have a file on his desk. This post both shows how he has interpreted the situated curriculum of the master classes (taking notes) and how he might enact the LEAD situated curriculum back at work by referring back to the file until it becomes part of him. It then shows how LEAD is beginning to influence his identity until it becomes part of him and the way he thinks:

*I have to say that I struggled to keep up, it was very fast moving for me! Taking notes and listening have never been my forte but I was fascinated by what he was saying.*

*I am going to have a file on my desk with different aspects of what we learned today and refer to it on a regular basis until it becomes part of me and the way I think.*

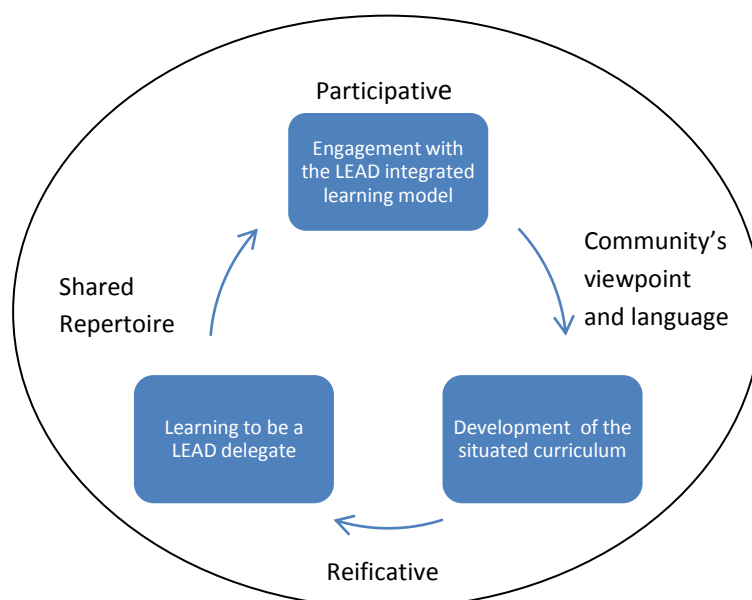
*Sod this I'm off for a pint - it's been a long day.*

**LEAD forum post by Adam, 7<sup>th</sup> November, 2009**

Identity is a key aspect of the SME leaders becoming delegates and is addressed further below in the discussion of legitimate peripheral participation. It is central also to the development and learning of the situated curriculum. I have argued that LEAD has a situated curriculum that is co-constructed between the facilitators and the delegates. I suggest that the situated curriculum is not learnt through seniors passing their knowledge on to novices as set out by Gherardi et al. (1998) and in CoP theory but is co-constructed across the delegates and facilitators dialogically and observationally. In ANT terms the situated curriculum emerges during interessement and enrolment, the stages of translation that involve the primary actor getting the other actors interested and negotiating their terms of involvement. The primary actor works at aligning the actors' interests. Chapter 7 discussed this process in more detail but in brief it is the process whereby the identity of the actors is stabilized and their interests become aligned for the benefit of the actor-network.



Figure 12 below summarises how engagement with the integrated learning model develops the situated curriculum of LEAD. The delegates participate in the learning interventions and, in doing so, co-construct the situated curriculum which is part of their learning to become a delegate. This process is cyclical and each of these three elements is deeply intertwined. The figure depicts them in the form of a rotation but in practice they are hard to separate out as they influence one another, sometimes simultaneously. The community's viewpoint and language is part of what constitutes the situated curriculum. Reification leads to labels developed by the group being put onto their practice. This can be seen for example with the action learning set's use of the word 'observation' which reifies their practice of hiding advice within the set meeting. Challenging the situated curriculum, which I discuss below, also becomes part of the practices of the community. The cycle involves participating in LEAD and developing the community's viewpoint and language which, in turn, reifies the participation and the viewpoint and language/situated curriculum. The example above showing how the terms 'observation' and 'story' are created is an example of the development of a shared repertoire between community members. This shared repertoire is part of the community's viewpoint and language through which the situated curriculum emerges. This particular shared repertoire reifies the act of being a LEAD delegate.



**Figure 12: The cycle of development of the LEAD situated curriculum**

I now go on to show how the delegates conform to the situated curriculum but also challenge it. I show how challenging the situated curriculum makes it visible.

## 8.5 Challenging the situated curriculum

The aims of LEAD are to help owner-managers develop their leadership capabilities. Identity is central to the owner-managers learning how to become delegates. To this end to be a delegate means conforming to certain ways of behaving and therefore conforming to the situated curriculum. As the following post by Paul suggests, there is the 'old me' or the 'LEAD way':

*I am still really enjoying the course. I am starting to think about situations with a much more "step back" approach and finding the issues are far easier to deal with. The most difficult thing for me is making sure I do it all of the time, I find myself slipping into the "old me" and then realising that there is another way - The LEAD way!*

**LEAD forum post by Paul, 1<sup>st</sup> April, 2009**

Here, I want to demonstrate that once the delegates learn the situated curriculum they also learn to challenge it. This is ever present in the ALS where they persistently try to break the 'rules' that they themselves have set for this space. In the first set meeting all set members establish their own ground rules for their set, the following ground rules are from the set I observed and reflect typical ground rules in other ALS:

1. Confidentiality
2. Commitment to attendance
3. Commitment to actions and reporting back
4. Discussions stay within the group
5. Non-judgemental
6. It's okay to remind members of the ground rules
7. Group consent is needed for furthering an issue beyond its scheduled time frame
8. Respect the decision(s) of issue holder/presenter
9. Open questions, not advice

**Action Learning Set A: Ground Rules**

The ground rules are revisited throughout the duration of the set meetings and are amended or added to as appropriate. The members of the ALS I observed all agreed to these ground rules and they were pinned up on the wall at every set meeting. The ALS are designed to help members learn through reflection by asking open questions and, crucially, not offering one another advice (Smith, 2009). The delegates often tried to break the 'rule' of not giving advice by disguising advice by starting a sentence with, 'an observation I have is...', or 'observation...' and then go on to explicitly give advice. The following account is taken from one of the set meetings although I witnessed similar accounts in nearly all of the set meetings. I have presented three different parts of the observation. It shows some aspects of the situated curriculum of the ALS that delegates have developed and learnt. For example they have developed the practice of holding a pen up to indicate they want to say something (thus developing the situated curriculum). The facilitator tries to help them turn a statement into a question that might help the issue holder (thus making the situated curriculum explicit). The account then shows how they try to challenge the situated curriculum by asking for advice or offering advice which is disguised as an 'observation' or a 'story' as they put it:

*Frances presents her issue and a couple of the set members ask some questions. This doesn't seem to be helping Frances. Gaynor put her pen in front of her to indicate she wants to chip in and makes an 'observation', as she puts it, and suggests an action for Frances. [Facilitator] steps in and asks Gaynor if she can rephrase what she has just said and turn it into a question that could help Frances. Gaynor responds, 'I just want to tell her what to do' to which Colin says, 'well, yeah we're all thinking that but you have to ask a question.'*

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*Adam says he doesn't feel he is getting anywhere with his issue but he wants to know what to do, he wants a resolution. He shuffles back in his seat and sighs and asks the group to tell him what to do. Earlier on he had been extolling the benefits of open questions when they did the process review on Frances' issue. And now he is asking the group for explicit advice. He laughs a little and winks at the facilitator presumably acknowledging that this isn't what the action learning set should do. Gaynor immediately says, 'we're not allowed to do that' at the same time as Simon says, 'we don't do that here'*

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*'A story, I think' says Gaynor and she tells Alan a story from her own company about her Managing Director. She begins to tell him that he could do the same. Alan asks if she can tell him a bit more about how she handled this situation. Gaynor giggles 'we're not allowed to tell you' to which Alan answers, 'you can cheat'*

**Ethnographic diary ALS observation, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2009**

This account shows how the situated curriculum is being developed and learnt and also challenged. The first part shows that Colin wants to reinforce the situated curriculum by telling Gaynor “*you have to ask a question*”. In the second part Adam specifically asks the groups to tell him what to do. By laughing and winking at the facilitator he is showing that he knows he should not be asking for advice but working through the process of open questions instead. This is reinforced by Gaynor (who, incidentally is the main perpetrator of advice-giving) saying “*we're not allowed to do that*” and Simon who says, “*we don't do that here*”. Gaynor and Simon are speaking on behalf of this group who have developed an understanding of what the correct behaviour should be. Despite the set members knowing what they should do the third part shows how Gaynor tries to get around or renegotiate the situated curriculum. By using the term, “*a story*”, Gaynor disguises her advice for her fellow set member.

Alan corroborates by telling Gaynor she can cheat and tell him what to do. This account is light-hearted and the set members genuinely have each other's interests at heart. What it shows is that the situated curriculum is being surfaced and challenged.

Gherardi et al. (1998) state that, to the members of a CoP, what they have called the 'situated curriculum' amounts to nothing more than one of the many aspects of daily workplace activity that are taken for granted. They suggest that:

“...once socialization to work has produced its effects, and newcomers have moved on from the role of peripheral participants to the status of fully legitimate members of the community, the learning they have acquired, together with its pattern and implicit complex logic, becomes part of cognitive structure or plan of action, and is best understood as a custom...sustained by the community” (p. 291).<sup>50</sup>

The situated curriculum thus becomes invisible. What I want to show here is that as Gherardi et al. (1998) suggest, people become so used to the situated curriculum in their community that it renders itself invisible or at least hard to describe. Certainly, I could never ask the delegates directly what the situated curriculum was or how they were learning it. By challenging the situated curriculum, I argue that the delegates surface it. In ANT terms, Law (1992) uses the analogy of a healthy person, for whom, most of the workings of the body are concealed, even from them. It is only when we are ill that we begin to detect the network complexities. I argue then that challenging the situated curriculum makes it (or part of it) visible.

## **8.6 Learning to be a LEAD delegate**

This section offers a CoP and ANT reading of the situated curriculum and how delegates learn on LEAD, the CoP reading using Lave and Wenger's (1991) legitimate peripheral participation and the ANT reading using the processes of

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<sup>50</sup> Gherardi et al. (1998) also refer to Bourdieu's (1980) habitus to show how this custom is sustained collectively by the community. This resonates with Wenger et al.'s (2009, p. 37) concept of digital habitats which is conceived of as a mutually-defining relationship between a species and a place.

interessement and enrolment to explain both how SME leaders *become* LEAD delegates.

### 8.6.1 Legitimate Peripheral Participation

As discussed in chapter 4, legitimate peripheral participation encompasses:

“[the] process of being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities”  
(Wenger 1998, p.4, emphasis in the original).

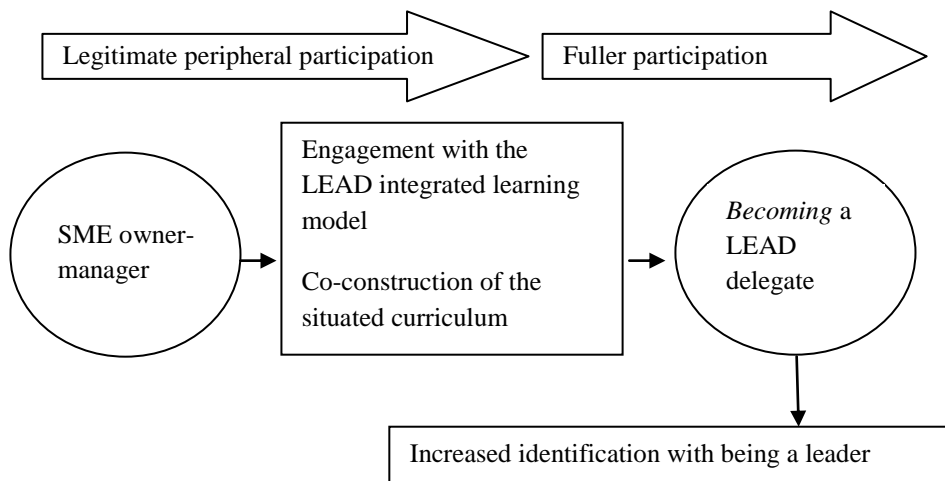
As discussed in chapter 4 Lave and Wenger’s (1991) seminal work uses legitimate peripheral participation to characterize the process by which newcomers become included in a CoP. The newcomers learn from old-timers, increasing their legitimacy within the group and moving from peripheral participation to full participation as they identify more with the CoP in question. In chapter 7 I proposed that LEAD delegates learnt from one another during the process of legitimate peripheral participation with the old-timers being the LEAD team. Here, I want to use the central concept within legitimate peripheral participation; how the learners’ identity shifts as they become fuller participants. Typically, a delegate’s identity and behaviour changes with increased participation. Joining the programme as owner-managers of small businesses they often comment that at the beginning they do not feel like leaders, rather, they feel they are impostors. Feelings of loneliness and isolation are common as demonstrated in the following quote:

*“To many people it is very lonely, it’s lonely being an owner-manager”*

**Sarah, cohort 4**

With no management team or hierarchical structure, and sitting at the head of the company in the ‘leader’ role, the owner-manager has nobody around them to share thoughts with (Smith and Peters, 2006). As they engage with the integrated learning model the delegates learn from one another and develop the situated curriculum. Through their participation they learn how to become a delegate which, in turn,

develops their own leadership capabilities and results in an increased identification with being a leader. Remarks such as, ‘*I know that I am a leader*’ or ‘*I have the confidence now to be a leader*’ are common. Participating in the development of the CoP’s learning and learning/developing the situated curriculum brings the delegates closer to full participation as depicted in the figure 13.



**Figure 13: Shift in identity through legitimate peripheral participation**

This figure shows that increased identification with leadership can be seen almost as a by-product of learning to be a delegate. Legitimate peripheral participation is linked with learning to become a delegate (rather than explicitly becoming a leader). Increased identification with leadership happens as a result of fuller participation as a delegate. Becoming LEAD delegates influences their practice of running small businesses and how and where they are accountable. CoPs have a regime of mutual accountability which becomes part of the practice (Wenger, 1998, p. 81). As SME leaders the delegates are not only accountable to one another within the LEAD CoP but are also accountable to their businesses (and peripheral networks as outlined in chapter 7). LEAD is a leadership programme so if it achieves its pedagogic aims of developing leadership capabilities, we should accordingly expect to see an increased identification with leadership. I argue that it is through the process of learning to be a delegate and becoming a fuller participant that a shift in identity towards leadership happens. In CoP theory, change in identity is inevitable with movement away from the periphery. The following quote from Noel demonstrates this process:

*“I feel that my attitude to running my company has most definitely changed in the short period that I have been on LEAD for instance. I don’t know too much about this, but I think that it is pretty much linked to confidence. In terms of the relationship between risk and confidence, and I think that maybe my confidence has been increased in business, it has probably been increased socially but I am not quite sure. But certainly in business it has, to be part of this cohort, I tell a lot of people about LEAD and how it is helping me in business.”*

**Interview: Noel, cohort 5**

For Noel being part of his cohort affects his running of the business through an increase in confidence and a change in his attitude to risk. The joint enterprise within a LEAD CoP can be considered to be both learning how to be a delegate *and* a shift in identity and practice of being an owner-manager to becoming a leader. Therefore the practice of the CoP is both as a delegate and as a leader (or a delegate with increased identification with leadership). Gerber and Scott (2007, p. 463) argue that key factors in the process of identity development are the personal histories and perspectives of the learners. The following quotes show that the perspectives of the learners are indeed a key factor as to become a LEAD delegate they have to be ready to change their identity<sup>51</sup>:

*“You have to be open to changing your identity - Well LEAD was perfect for me, but you have to be ready for that change. You have to want it... you have to desire that change or want to ... in order to do it..... I feel a bigger person for it, a better person, certainly business-wise, more informed and more able to deal with what I am going to have to deal with in the next 12 months.”*

**Interview: Amy, cohort 5**

*“I was looking for self development, but self development in order to develop the business.”*

**Interview: Billy, cohort 5**

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<sup>51</sup> This is also linked to the recruitment process whereby the LEAD team strive hard to recruit owner-managers who are willing to engage with the learning experiences LEAD offers. There are times when LEAD is not appropriate for recruited delegates which has not been explored in this study but it an area for further research which is discussed in section 11.5.



I have argued that learning and developing the situated curriculum is part of the process of learning to be a LEAD delegate. Using Lave and Wenger's (1991) legitimate peripheral participation I have shown that as delegates reach fuller participation their accountability lies not only to the members of the CoP but to their businesses also. Accordingly, fuller participation leads to a shift in identity and increased identification with leadership. The co-construction of the situated curriculum is a key proponent in the movement towards fuller participation. In the next part of this section I show how ANT's use of intersement and enrolment in the process of translation can be used to contribute to understanding how the SME leaders become LEAD delegates.

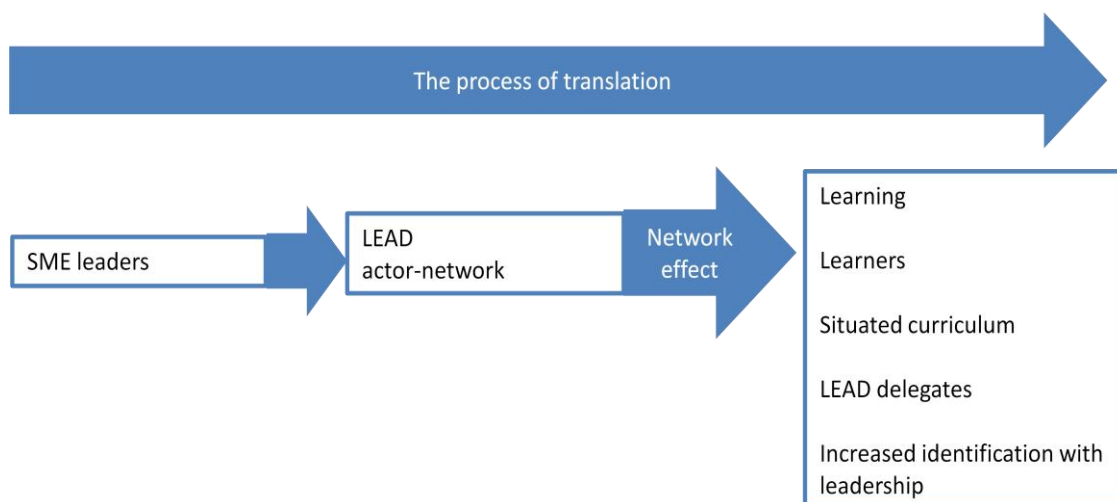
### **8.6.2 Translation of learners**

The process of translation (Callon, 1986a; Latour 1987) is used to see how an actor-network is created and how actors assume certain roles within the network in relation to one another. A detailed discussion of the process of translation was covered in chapter 7 to conceptualise LEAD as an actor-network. Although it is not a learning theory as such Fox (2000, 2005) has used ANT to understand learning within a network and as a result of the network. Specifically, Fox (2005) has framed translation to focus on the role education establishments have on the consumption of learning. He states:

“People are enrolled by teachers and translated into ‘learners’; they form queues to buy books, get in line to join the ranks of the professions, become this or that professional identity, participate in an educated, critical-thinking democracy, enter, inhabit and participate in the public life of the nation, and produce and consume the culture” (2005, p. 106).

The role of the university in the translation of the SME owner-managers to LEAD delegates, and therefore, ‘learners’, echoes the process of legitimate peripheral participation whereby their identity shifts to that of a leader through this process. In ANT, the role of the primary actor is key in the process of translation. The university is considered to be the primary actor, and the LEAD team on behalf of the university, which seeks to stabilize the interests of other actors to be enrolled into the network.

Here, the other actors are the SME leaders who need to be enrolled into the LEAD actor-network for the process of translation, and subsequently, for learning to take place. Fox (2009) argues that learning and the learners themselves are network effects, to which I add that so is the shift in identity of the actors. This is summed up in figure 14.



**Figure 14: The translation of learners**

By applying an ANT reading we can see that the process of translation enables the university to enrol SME leaders as actors into the actor-network. Following Fox’s (2009) example of seeing the learner and the learning process in a distinctive way consistent with a process-oriented sociology, as a network effect, I argue that leadership learning is a network effect. Adding to this I suggest that the situated curriculum is also a network effect. The LEAD actor-network translates owner-managers into learners and, arguably, leaders.

Fox (2009) argues that ANT can help us to understand how knowledge is created, “[it] provides a set of concepts and methodological principles for understanding *how*” (p.42). I have shown that applying an ANT reading to my data can add to an understanding of *how* SME leaders learn on LEAD. However, something that is not overly addressed by ANT authors is the process by which room is needed for identities to shift within the actor-network. As I have shown, through the process of translation the primary actor stabilizes the interests and identities of actors to be enrolled. Whilst it is accepted that translation is not a linear process, and one which is repeated (see Smith et al., 2010), there seems to be little attention paid to the process

of shifting identities within the actor-network and how identities are formed at different paces. For example, the following discussion on the online forum shows that Bob is feeling left behind. There was a thread whereby the delegates were sharing their experiencing of the coaching which led to a wider discussion about changes they were noticing in themselves and their companies. Roger highlights that his staff have noticed a change to his style, which they think is hilarious. Bob responds to Roger's post, although it is also a response to all the discussions in this thread, making the comment that he is feeling left behind:

*I thought the coaching was great; it has helped me (in conjunction with some of the stuff [master class speaker] discussed) to understand a route to getting more out of the people in my Company, addressing head-on my expectations of the programme.*

*The staff think my new style is hilarious but the outcome is that I have tackled a number of issues with tenacity and some measurable success. It has even led to one or two starting to jostle for position to succeed me in running the business! It's lifted the morale and the productivity of some of the key people in the business and I'm hopeful it will spread like some sort of contagion.*

**Post on the LEAD forum by Roger, 26<sup>th</sup> November, 2008**

.....

*Anyone else feeling left behind? ☺ I've done bugger all so far!*

**Post by Bob, 26<sup>th</sup> November, 2008**

Throughout the programme the delegates learn at different stages and paces. This can be expected from any learning intervention. The co-construction of the situated curriculum and learning in general across the programme happens at a different speed and rate for each delegate. ANT does not explicitly address the movement and flexibility needed in an actor-network to allow room for shifting identities to emerge at different times and at different speeds within the network. ANT advocates that identities are stabilized by the enrolment process but legitimate peripheral participation shows that identities continue to develop as they become fuller participants. Together, both readings show that a shift in identity is integral to the learning process.

In the next section I discuss my own role in the co-construction of the situated curriculum and therefore the shift in identity for the learners. The chapter then finishes with a discussion of three resultant points from bringing together ANT and CoP to look at the analysis of how delegates learn on LEAD.

### **8.7 Reflexivity in the co-construction of the situated curriculum**

Many of the delegates refer to their time on LEAD as their ‘LEAD journey’. This label has become part of the final learning and reflection day which involves them visually depicting their interpretations of their LEAD journey. As both director of the programme and researcher I am an integral part of their LEAD journey. I have discussed reflexivity in chapter 6 and I return to it here as my involvement in their legitimate peripheral participation and shift in identity needs critical reflexivity. The responsibility I take in their learning and how they learn to be a delegate should be highlighted. The process of researching the programme and writing the thesis has impacted my practice too, which in turn is influencing the SME leaders’ learning of how to be delegates. The following account has been taken from my learning log from cohort 10.

*Yesterday, I decided to make some of what sits behind LEAD explicit to them [cohort 10]. They haven't been using the forum much and I feel they are missing out on the reflection and sharing their learning. So, before [speaker] came in for the master class I had ten minutes with them on my own. I went through each element of LEAD and told them what we hoped they would get from them and why this could happen. Giving my recent writing on the situated curriculum I feel confident in sharing this with them (although I didn't call it that). What I showed was how they should behave in the different elements of LEAD and why it is good for them. I'm acutely aware of my role in this but I think they can benefit from making this explicit. [Delegate] said something to the effect of am I saying they just need to take their medicine.*

**Extract from learning log, 10<sup>th</sup> January, 2010**

Although this a recent account and my practice of being the director of LEAD has been increasingly informed by my research and analysis, I have always been integral to the co-construction of the situated curriculum and their ‘LEAD journey’. I have shown that the management school is the primary actor in the process of translation

and therefore I am also a primary actor in the co-construction of the situated curriculum and the delegates' learning. Given that the programme focuses less on teaching owner-managers to become leaders and more on developing their critical thinking skills in order to be able to develop their leadership capabilities it is essential that the primary actor is also critically reflective and reflexive. Cunliffe (2004) writes:

“If we accept that management education is not just about helping managers become more effective organizational citizens but also about helping them become critical thinkers and moral practitioners, then critical reflexivity is of particular relevance” (p. 408).

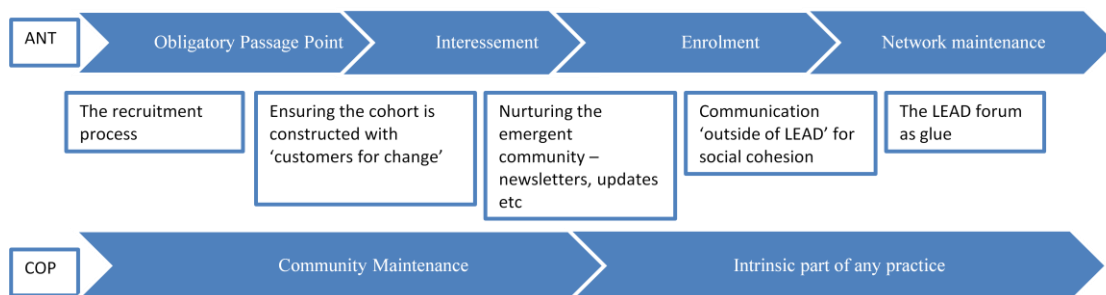
I would add to this that critical reflexivity is needed by course designers, teachers, facilitators and other who share a part of any student's learning. Writing this thesis has made me understand the delegates' LEAD journeys in terms of the co-construction of the situated curriculum and learning to be a delegate. Whilst I was aware I had a role in their learning journeys, undertaking this research and analysis has made this more explicit, given it labels through which to think and understand, and is enabling me to think more deeply about my own role in the co-construction of the situated curriculum and subsequently the delegates' learning. Building on from this, I finish this chapter with a CoP and ANT reading of the analysis and offer points which arise from this that can add to the theoretical frameworks.

## **8.8 CoP and ANT: what the two readings offer**

In this next section I offer three points for discussion which result from bringing ANT and CoP together to look at how delegates learn on LEAD, they are: (1) Community / network maintenance; (2) enablers, and; (3) salience.

### **8.8.1 Community / network maintenance**

I show how the cohort is maintained using CoP's principle of community maintenance and ANT's process of stabilizing actors' identities. I present this discussion by talking through figure 15 which, rather crudely, follows a typical lifespan of a cohort chronologically from construction through to the end of the programme.



**Figure 15: Maintenance of the community throughout its lifetime**

ANT shows that networks demand continual maintenance because order is always provisional. Law (1996, p. 3) points out that enrolment is precarious; links and nodes in a network do not last all by themselves, they need constant maintenance work. In CoP theory this constitutes community maintenance which Wenger (1998, p. 74) acknowledges is an intrinsic part of any practice. Community or network maintenance is an important component in showing how delegates learn especially when we consider that peer-to-peer learning underpins the pedagogy and thus requires that the community to be strong enough to foster learning.

In chapter 7 I briefly touched upon the idea that LEAD has a space before it is populated by SME leaders. Through ANT I looked at how the primary actor sought to stabilize and align the interests of the actors before the delegates officially started. The obligatory passage point presented in chapter 7 was the recruitment process through which potential delegates had to pass. Once potential delegates were interviewed and invited to join the programme efforts were made to keep their interest and begin to foster a relationship with them. Techniques such as sending them newsletters with news of the current cohort along with inviting them to attend some of the master classes and additional sessions that run within the university that may be of interest to them were employed. Arguably, these techniques help to nurture the community and thus provide maintenance of the emergent cohort.

During the recruitment process the LEAD team tries to ensure that the right type of delegates sign up those who are enthusiastic about their business and eager to learn. In Jackson's (2002) terms the LEAD team are looking for 'customers for change' - as the

quote from Amy above demonstrated: “*you have to be ready for that change*”. In ANT terms this is all part of intersement and enrolment, as discussed in chapter 7. Once SME leaders are in the actor-network or CoP, the process of becoming a delegate is heavily influenced by community maintenance. Many delegates talk about a sense of belonging and the importance that trust plays within the network. The following quote shows that Noel has a sense of belonging to the CoP despite feeling a connection with a smaller subset of the cohort:

*“But there is a sense of belonging to something much bigger and everybody else has formed these relationships as well, and that we are all part of this together. That is what I mean when I use the term solidarity. Even now, this is important, even though there are some people that I don’t particularly know very well and haven’t shared even a cup of tea, there is a sense that we are going through the same thing, and an empathy I think that bonds us together. So even though I have got my own little social group there is a greater sense of group than these smaller teams. You are part of something and you are all sharing the same experience, and I think there is a great sense that you could speak to anybody and they would be there to help.”*

**Interview: Noel, cohort 5**

For Noel it is empathy that bonds the CoP together. Even though he has stronger connections to some delegates more than others he recognises there is a feeling of solidarity because they are part of something together. ANT advocates that relations need to be repeatedly performed or the network will dissolve. The interviews suggest that the delegates who were more involved in community maintenance felt they had a stronger connection with the CoP. Consequently, those who did not participate in the community maintenance were distanced, as the following quote suggests:

*“I think it was organising the social side of it as well, which helped [to] come together; definitely. Those people that didn’t come were sort of on the side and were distanced, more than anything.”*

**Interview: Amy, cohort 5**

One of the major forms of communication on LEAD in organising social events as well as discussions relating to the programme was the LEAD forum. Fox (2009) argues that ANT can help us to understand how knowledge is created because it deals with socio-materiality:

“People in tandem with material objects are constantly transforming their social world and material environment, creating and learning new knowledge as they go” (Fox, 2009, p. 42).

Since actor-networks are always provisional, the use of the online forum can be seen as a contributory factor in balancing the provisional order. The following quotes show that it is considered to be the glue that prevents them from being cut off from the community:

*“But then you go away and if you didn’t have that forum, suddenly you’re cut off. And I couldn’t imagine that feeling of being cut off because it is being ... when you’re learning, it is creative isn’t it; it’s all about those you know ... it’s just that buzz. To not have the forum there would be like a brick wall, it really would. You’re cut off then from that community.”*

**Interview: Amy, cohort 5**

*“You meet up with the master classes; people are craving for another get together, something to share to consolidate. I think as I have just said....you have got the forum there you have an element of ...it keeps everyone together it is a glue...but I am using it more for be here at this time at this date rather than....there are some people that are very good...others who don’t use it.”*

**Interview: Jason, cohort 5**

The LEAD forum could be considered to be a boundary object, a concept which is picked up both in ANT (Star, 1989) and CoP (Wenger, 1998). In ANT Star (1989, p 46) says: “a boundary object “sits in the middle” of a group of actors with divergent viewpoints”. Even when the online forum does not have a perceived value for some of the delegates there is still some recognition that it has a role to play. For example, in one interview Sarah frequently talked about how the LEAD forum did not add anything for her experience of LEAD, indeed she stated that: *“for me LEAD wouldn’t*



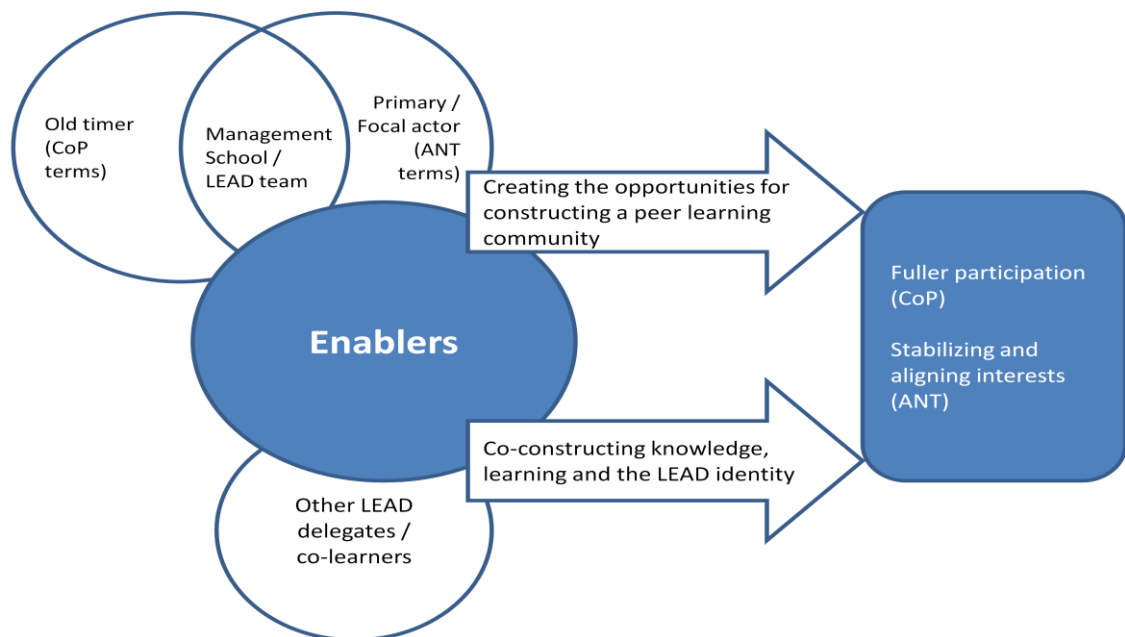
*be different without it*". However, she talked a lot about how she found it useful for the 'socialness' and learning more about her peers, particularly the ones she did not talk to at the master classes: *"it's another piece to the jigsaw, a small piece"*.

Boundary objects can play or perform different roles in different situations. This can be seen in the following example whereby the online forum was used after LEAD had officially finished. Ordinarily, it would seem that the LEAD network is only temporarily strong before it dissolves, that is, it has a definite life-span over the duration of the programme. Once the programme finishes only a handful of delegates continue with some form of network maintenance. Even though they have access to the LEAD forum, its use rapidly dissolves and the LEAD network dissipates. The LEAD forum is socially constructed through practice during the time in which LEAD 'exist' for the delegates. During its 'lifespan' use of the LEAD forum makes up part of the community/network maintenance. After LEAD finishes the delegates rarely go on to use the online forum. As discussed in chapter 7, for cohort 8 a tragic event happened after the cohort had officially finished whereby one of the delegates died of a heart attack on Christmas day. Even though the delegates had not used the online forum since finishing the programme, it was used over the Christmas period to spread the news of this sad and sudden event. The forum enabled the whole cohort to communicate the news, share their thoughts and feelings at the loss of one of their fellow members and to make arrangements to attend the funeral and send flowers to the family. Viewing the online forum as a boundary object can help us to understand how in both CoP and ANT terms a community can be maintained or be reconfigured after it has (on the surface) dissolved.

Community or network maintenance is an essential element of keeping any community together, even when it has dissipated. It is therefore integral to understanding how delegates learn to be delegates on (and in the case of the tragic death of a delegate) and beyond LEAD. Community maintenance has been addressed in chapter 7 where I showed how the primary actor, the LEAD team began community maintenance as the actor-network / CoP was constructed and throughout its life-span. I also showed how the delegates were integral also to the maintenance of the learning community which is linked to trust and the circulation of knowledge.

### 8.8.2 Enablers

Conceptualising LEAD as a CoP and an actor-network in order to explore how delegates asks questions of both theories and poses new opportunities for looking at the role of old-timers in SLT/CoP theory and enrolment in ANT. The ‘function’ of old-timers and enrolment share similarities in the building of a CoP/actor-network respectively. However, when they are applied to LEAD some questions arise that challenge both concepts. In SLT/CoP theory old-timers help newcomers to learn the practices of the community. In relation to LEAD the old-timers are considered to be the LEAD team and facilitators. In ANT the role of enrolment can be replaced or at least added to by the concept of co-enrolment. Figure 16 summarises my argument of the role of enablers and I address each theory in turn and show how ‘enablers’ may be a helpful term to bridge both theories in relation to LEAD.



**Figure 16: The role of enablers in the peer learning community**

In chapter 7 I showed how the SME leaders joined the community voluntarily and whilst they all have knowledge and experience to bring to the community, i.e. none is an old-timer as such, helping a newcomer learn the practice of the CoP. I argue that conceptualising LEAD as a CoP brings with it a different set of behaviours to how other CoPs are set out in the literature. The delegates see themselves as co-learners, who all have a valid contribution to make to the community, as opposed to old-timers

and newcomers. Whilst the delegates were all old-timers at being owner-managers, they were newcomers at being LEAD delegates. I suggest that it is the LEAD team and the facilitators who take the role of old-timers helping the delegates become fuller participants. A different interpretation, which employs the term ‘enablers’, may help us to understand how newcomers learn to become participants in the LEAD CoP. Here the enablers are the LEAD team, such as the facilitators. This is a departure from the CoP reading as the old-timers can be conceived of as the enablers. Conceptualising a LEAD cohort as a CoP means that the practice/joint enterprise is being an SME leader *and* learning to be a delegate. Given that there are no old-timers in the CoP sense, the concept of enablers can be used to show how delegates learn how to be better owner-managers / leaders. Here the enablers create the environment for learning. Similarly, in ANT the concept of enrolment can be used to explain how the delegates learn. In chapter 7 I presented the idea of co-enrolment whereby the actors help one another learn how to ‘be’ a part of the network with no one actor perceived as having a greater or lesser extent of knowledge with regards to the joint enterprise of running a business. This process enabled stabilization of the network. In this chapter I have shown the delegates co-construct the situated curriculum, and thus their learning. The following quote shows that Tasha feels that they can share experiences because they are all in small businesses facing the same challenges despite not being in the same industry:

*“The actual other people and how much I have got from them, so just the opportunity to be with other people not in the same industry ...but in small businesses with the same challenges, that has been really good, because we have been able to share experiences.”*

**Interview: Tasha, cohort 5**

Enablers in this sense are both the other delegates and the primary actor (the LEAD team). In ANT the focal actor aligns the interests of the other actors. I have considered the management school (and therefore the LEAD team including facilitators) to be the focal actor. Although the focal actor does not share the joint enterprise in CoP terms of being an SME leader enrolled on LEAD, there could be merit in applying the concept of the focal actor within ANT to CoP theory. Here the focal actor could take

the role of old-timers within the process of becoming fuller participants. Gherardi et al. (1998 p. 283) state that newcomers are not ‘social dopes’ but active actors who are as much product as producer of the social reality they live in. Although they are referring to newcomers in the workplace this argument applies to newcomers into LEAD, i.e. the delegates are the product and producer of the social reality of LEAD. The following quote shows that through being ‘open’ and sharing a common goal of wanting to develop their leadership, the delegates are both the product and producers of the social reality:

*“There is a link because everybody is on LEAD and everybody wants to become a good leader, or be a good leader so there is a commonality there that sort of links you...I think because we are there because we want to do it better and you know that you can’t do it better if you are closed. I think everyone recognises that in the openness is the growth and the learning.”*

**Interview: Julie, cohort 5**

The term ‘enabler’ may be implemented to cut across ANT and CoP. However, the idea presented here is that the primary or focal actor (the LEAD team on behalf of the management school) can take up the mantle of the old-timer in CoP terms to help the delegates participate more fully in the process of legitimate peripheral participation. My role as director of the programme is as an enabler as I help them to learn the situated curriculum and allow room for their own situated curriculum to develop. I frequently start threads on the forum and back up my own comments with suggestions on how to use the space or how to behave. This resonates with both the leader and the facilitator role as presented by Wenger et al. (2002). The following post was the first one made by me for this cohort on the online forum. I tell the delegates not to worry too much about their spelling or grammar when using the online forum:

*Hi everyone*

*To get us all used to using the forum and to get to know a bit about each other please could you join in on this icebreaker activity.*

- *What is your favourite food / drink and why?*

*When using the forum please don't worry too much about spelling or grammar, it's the discussion that matters.*

*Sue*

**LEAD forum post by me, 13<sup>th</sup> October 2008.**

Guiding the delegates or role modelling is part of the social learning theory that underpins LEAD. The enablers, in this particular instance, me, are part of the process of imitation and modelling. However, the role of the enablers will always be different to that of the delegates because the delegates are learning to become delegates and will therefore observe, imitate and model one another. The enablers will create opportunities and spaces for this to take place. I have suggested that the situated curriculum is not learnt through seniors passing their knowledge on to novices as set out by Gherardi et al. (1998) and in CoP theory but is co-constructed across the delegates and facilitators dialogically and observationally. In ANT terms the situated curriculum emerges during intersement whereby the identity of the actors is stabilized and also through enrolment whereby the actors' interests are aligned. Enablers help the SME leaders learn how to become LEAD delegates and thus develop and learn the situated curriculum which, as I have shown, has an impact on their identity as it shifts from owner-manager to leader (through the process of becoming a LEAD delegate as shown in Figure 13).

In CoP terms, enablers help the members of the CoP reach fuller participation. In ANT terms the enablers help to stabilize the network and align the interests of those in it. It is not my intention to change the fundamental idea of what a CoP is or how an actor-network is created, more so I aim to stretch the theories or as Wenger (2010) suggests, different theories and vocabularies tell different stories about the world. The intention therefore is to propose a way of understanding how learning takes place on

LEAD by using the concept of enablers, and not to change fundamental conceptions of what a CoP or an actor-network is.

### **8.8.3 Saliency**

CoP and ANT both deal with the circulation of existing knowledge and creation of new knowledge and ideas. However, neither explicitly focuses on the saliency of the knowledge within the CoP or actor-network between the newcomers or actors. This is of particular relevance in relation to small businesses and leadership learning. Research shows that small business owners have little opportunity to learn leadership, especially in a social context, i.e. from other people (Kempster and Watts, 2002; Kempster, 2009). Elsewhere, Kempster (2007) has shown that leadership can be learnt from notable people and that owner-managers lack the situations to learn leadership. LEAD provides the opportunity for the delegates to learn from one another, largely through a dialogical process. The saliency of the conversations the delegates have lies at the heart of the participative pedagogy. Their experiences resonate with one another, which addresses the often noted feelings of isolation as owner-managers (see Smith and Peters, 2006). In addition to their experiences it is often their tacit knowledge of running their own companies that contributes to the circulation of ideas and exchange of knowledge through peer-to-peer learning. Tacit knowledge as conceptualised originally by Polanyi (1967) envisages it as a way to know more than we can tell. Wenger (1998, p. 47) acknowledges that tacit knowledge includes what is said and what is left unsaid and because it is often what we take for granted, it tends to fade into the background. Similarly, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) argue that more attention should be paid to tacit knowledge held by individuals. Understanding LEAD as having a situated curriculum draws upon tacit knowledge in two ways. Firstly, the situated curriculum is largely tacit; certainly the people involved in learning the situated curriculum would probably not be able to describe it (see Gherardi et al., 1998, p.291 for a discussion on this). Secondly, the delegates' tacit knowledge on how to run a business is relevant to each other through the process of peer-to-peer learning and sharing their tacit knowledge through being in the LEAD community. The saliency of their experience and conversations contributes to their leadership learning in general and their affirmation of their identity as leaders of their

businesses. The following quote shows that the solidarity of the group and the bond it creates is a contributing factor:

*“That sense of solidarity, being part of a group and part of a team. There is a real sense of that, from the very beginning when we were asked to go away with people and you begin to bond with people in the group.”*

**Interview: Noel, cohort 5**

The salience to each other contributes to how they learn. I have shown that in CoP terms there is no old-timer as such from whom to learn how to be a delegate, this knowledge and identity is co-constructed largely through a dialogical process. Noel recognises that the solidarity of the group has influenced how he has bonded with his fellow delegates, and goes on to say that the pressure of not selling to one another (as he would experience in other networking relationships) enables learning:

*“Probably the greatest thing on LEAD is something that you are not teaching us, not showing us, it should be just part of that is to bring like minded businesses, people don’t feel the pressure where they have to buy, sell and trade between each other. Although business is done naturally in a far more sort of organic way between businesses. If you go to a network environment of any sort, there is always a sub text of having to do business with these other people. There genuinely isn’t that pressure between people on LEAD so rare, so unique to find a forum where people can just bring themselves not the businesses to learn that is incredibly invaluable.”*

**Interview: Noel, cohort 5**

Adding to this, Billy highlights the non competitive environment which helps to bring barriers down. Crucially, he recognises that learning happens through talking to one another, having a common goal makes talking easier:

*“We are all there for the same reason to learn about ourselves and about business. So because we have got a common goal none of us are looking to sell which then generally means you can bring your barriers down, and generally people don’t think that they have to pressure you into ‘we do this, we need to come and help you’ type thing. So it makes talking so much easier.”*

**Interview: Billy, cohort 5**

The common goal is like Wenger’s (1998) joint enterprise, here it is both becoming a delegate and becoming (or increasing their identity as) a leader. These identities are developed dialogically within the CoP / actor-network; as Dave recognises, they learn through their discourse:

*“Because we weren’t doing any written work, we were all learning through our discourse. To get the level of that up to the level that everyone was being very honest and trusting.....there isn’t any one on the course who dominates proceedings or has a very entrenched opinion at all.”*

**Interview: Dave, cohort 5**

The social view of learning occurs through the salience of the conversations between the delegates. The delegates have invested their time (and money) in LEAD and they learn from one another because their discussions are relevant to one another. The learning is social - with and from one another. There is a pedagogic assumption that they (their embodied selves and the knowledge they bring) are salient to one another. They constantly draw on each other’s experiences because these experiences resonate with each other. An example of this is an excerpt from my ethnographic diary during an observation of the ALS:



*Gaynor says she thinks Adrian is doing the right things. Adam said earlier that Gaynor had done this and he's looking for advice from her. He's also picked up on something else Gaynor had done previously which was her setting out a ground rule with her MD – if the MD didn't get a response from her she could go ahead and make that decision. This was set up so that she wasn't holding up a decision making process within the company. Adam said he thinks he should try this in his company and goes on to think out loud about what else he is going to do. Gaynor comments on this and says, 'I hadn't thought of that before and I'm going to do that in my business'. Colin nods and adds, 'I learned a lot from it, Thank you'. Gaynor is nodding and agrees to which Simon adds, 'That's the first time we did it as a group. I learned a lot'.*

**Excerpt from ethnographic diary, 8<sup>th</sup> December, 2008**

Across the learning interventions, the salience of discussions the delegates have with their peers is an important factor, particularly on the LEAD forum. The sharing of experiences, and salience of experiences, happens all the time across LEAD. This post on the online forum by Simon to his ALS demonstrates the social view of learning:

*I really enjoyed the process itself although maybe my issue could have been thought about more before we met at the ALS. It is certainly a powerful process. I am thinking about issues in a different way now, and I too was surprised at how Adam and Alan's issues were relevant to my business.*

*Thanks all for this week's ALS. I found it really fascinating insight into the kinds of things we're all thinking of running our companies - I was surprised how much was the same as issues I've been facing myself, but enjoyed learning the differences as well.*

**Post by Simon in the ALS private discussion forum, 11<sup>th</sup> December, 2008**

Simon states that he was surprised that Adam and Alan's issues were similar to those he had been facing himself in his own business. The process of action learning encourages set members to reflect on how they learn, thus increasing their capacity to respond to new situations. Even though Adam and Alan's issues were unique to them, the salience of the issues resonated with Simon. Building on this is the understanding that the LEAD community (including the facilitators and administrators) have

untapped or latent knowledge that might be useful to them. There are many posts similar to these ones:

*“Some advice needed... I'm looking for web-based software that can be used to plot customer locations on a map of the UK whilst also tracking vehicles.... Please reply or phone me on [...]”*

**Post by Brendan, 13<sup>th</sup> November, 2008**  
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*“Does anyone have a capability to do 3-D printing, and to make it even more interesting ideally..... (Sue does the university have this capability?)”*

**Post, by Alan, 21<sup>st</sup> November, 2008**

A lot of the exchanges with one another are about practical aspects of running a small business. They often ask one another for advice or help with a need they have. Their experience, their conversations and knowledge lie at the very heart of the network. Lave and Wenger (1991) advance a practice-based theory of learning; this view helps in understanding how knowledge is constructed and circulated between the delegates who have the shared practice of being SME leaders and LEAD delegates. Sarah and Julie both recognise that sharing knowledge and being able to ask for help is bound up with their learning:

*“It is meeting new people, it is meeting people in different businesses. It is finding out how they started...how did they get to the place they are now, what are some of the difficulties, what are some of the problems they are facing. It is just surprising that you are not alone, because of sharing ...you may find that you have a suggestion, 'have you thought?' ... 'try this route if you are having this problem'. That happened to me.”*

**Interview: Sarah, cohort 4**

*“Because sharing things gives you confidence and doesn't make you feel so alone.”*

**Interview: Julie, cohort 5**

This addresses the isolation they feel as owner-managers and leads to an increase in confidence and an affirmation of their identity as they move towards a shift in identity towards that of a leader.

## **8.9 Summary**

This chapter asked: ‘how do delegates learn on LEAD?’ I have shown that delegates develop and learn the situated curriculum (Gherardi et al., 1998) with each cohort having a nuanced version of it. Delegates conform to the situated curriculum but also challenge it. Learning the situated curriculum is essential in SME leaders learning how to become LEAD delegates. Through CoP theory I showed that becoming a delegate was part of the process of becoming a fuller participant through legitimate peripheral participation. Through ANT I showed that the stabilizing of identities was critical for the LEAD actor-network to translate SME leaders into learners. Becoming delegates in turn develops their leadership capabilities and a shift in identity towards that of leaders. Together CoP theory and ANT offered three points for discussion in understanding how delegates learn on LEAD. The first showed that the community or network maintenance was instrumental in the process of building and maintaining a learning network to enable the shift in identity to occur. The second challenged the role of old-timers in CoP theory and the role of the focal actor in ANT. Here, the term, ‘enablers’ was offered to understand how space is created for learning to take place. The third point showed that the salience of being SME leaders underpinned the process of learning to become a delegate and a leader through peer-to-peer learning.

This chapter has looked at *how* the delegates learn on LEAD. The next and final data analysis chapter looks at *where* delegates learn on LEAD, and is dedicated to exploring the concept of space proposed as a series of learning spaces.

## CHAPTER 9

### LEARNING SPACES

#### CHAPTER 9: LEARNING SPACES

- 9.1 Introduction
- 9.2 Space and learning spaces in networked learning
- 9.3 How do these learning spaces contribute to our understanding of learning spaces in networked learning?
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### 9.1 Introduction

Chapter 8 showed how each LEAD cohort has a situated curriculum which is co-constructed between the delegates and LEAD team/facilitators. I showed how the SME leaders learn how to become delegates and in doing so increase their leadership capacities. This helped to explore *how* SME leaders learn on LEAD. This chapter

asks: ‘*where* do SME leaders learn on LEAD?’ The analysis of the data presented here is inductive and is supported by the theoretical frameworks of ANT and SLT/CoP theory. Unlike the previous two data analysis chapters I allow more space for the data to speak rather than through the lenses of ANT and SLT/CoP theory. The theoretical frameworks are used here to understand the social construction of learning spaces rather than the concept of learning spaces emerging from an ANT/SLT/CoP reading. Thus I present the concept of learning spaces which are developed from the data as an approach to show where SME leaders learn on LEAD. As such four learning spaces are identified: (1) peer-to-peer, (2) social, (3) reflective and (4) peripheral. I show how these learning spaces are, in ANT terms, a network effect, and, in SLT/CoP terms, part of the process of Lave and Wenger’s (1991) legitimate peripheral participation. I show how multiple learning spaces can be enacted at any one time through the engagement with the different elements of LEAD and in other areas of the delegates’ home and work lives. I also show how the learning spaces are relational with one another.

Firstly, I present a discussion on space and learning spaces within networked learning. This frames the context for the proposed four learning spaces which I present first through a discussion on social construction. The main body of the chapter consists of a detailed overview of each learning space presented through an amalgamation of the empirical data followed by a discussion of the social construction of each learning space. Finally I show how the learning spaces are relational with one another and, although they can be seen as discrete spaces, how they are heavily interconnected.

## **9.2 Space and learning spaces in networked learning**

Ryberg and Larsen (2008, p.105) argue that sociocultural learning theorists are becoming increasingly interested in learning that happens not only in discrete contexts, but in learning that happens across and between discrete constellations. Similarly, Brown and Long (2006) suggest that learning is not confined to scheduled classroom spaces and times; for them, the whole campus is a learning space providing environments for learning. This is particularly relevant for networked learning as our understanding about learning using technology is changing our ideas about learning spaces (see Oblinger, 2006). This chapter proposes four conceptual learning spaces as

a way of understanding where learning takes place across Ryberg and Larsen's (2008) 'discrete constellations' and how they provide environments for people to learn.

Space and learning spaces are of interest to networked learning scholars. Often the concept of learning space is used to present frameworks for networked learning design. Chan et al. (2001) present four spaces of learning models, namely, the future-classroom, the community-based, the structural-knowledge, and the complex learning models. These spaces, they hope, will provide a profound grasp of the future changes in education and form the basis of a theory for networked learning (Chan et al., 2001, p. 144). Other discussions look at the implications of ICT in the design of distance learning (Twining, 2001) or the sociocultural context in online learning (Warschauer, 2001). Jones and Dirckinck-Holmfeld (2009, p. 12) talk about the concept of learning environment which:

“...points towards the physical environment alongside the social organisation of the setting and as a consequence the idea of a networked learning environment points towards the socially and physically networked nature of learning environments distributed over space and time.”

Learning spaces can also be thought of in relation to the construction of identities. Hodgson's (2008) paper, for example, suggests that online learning communities can be considered as learning spaces which participants occupy and in which they construct individual and collective identities. Similarly, Ferreday et al. (2005) show that space has an important role in creating a sense of belonging, they state:

“What is important is not just the space itself (whether this is a physical place or an online learning environment), but the way that members engage with it” (Ferreday et al., 2005, p.4).

The learning spaces I present build on this quote to show that it is the way the delegates engage with the integrated learning model (through physical places and the online learning environment) which creates the conceptual learning spaces. Ryberg and Larsen (2008, p. 105) urge us not to focus on bounded spaces or separated

contexts of activity but to enhance our analytic focus on movements, flows and a continua of activities across domains. From an analytical point of view the learning spaces are presented as discrete spaces but I go on to show how they are relational with one another and how, to use Ryberg and Larsen's terminology, they can be seen as 'continua of activity across domains.'

### **9.3 How do these learning spaces contribute to our understanding of learning spaces in networked learning?**

The learning spaces presented here provide a different way of conceptualising learning spaces and learning generally in networked learning. They are conceived of as the result of learners engaging with the LEAD integrated learning model. Arguably, they can be seen as the effect of any peer learning community.<sup>52</sup> These learning spaces are less visible and tangible than those discussed in the literature. They can contribute to our understanding of learning and learning spaces in networked learning because they can demonstrate evidence of the desired learning outcomes of a programme, or at least activity related to the desired outcomes. Used in this way they can be seen as a very compelling way to rethink how facilitators in networked learning can support the learners. They are both constructs and effects of the learning community's engagement with the integrated learning model. If this engagement leads to the four learning spaces, I argue that the programme under investigation in this study is working for the learners. Goodyear (2009) looks at the idea of networked learning systems and argues that they evolve through the actions of teachers and students and others, like IT developers. The learning spaces can also be used to help our understanding of these actions. Accordingly, they can be used to think about the design of networked learning in which the possibility of creating the four learning spaces could be built in. This is not a technologically deterministic argument. More so it centres very sharply on the social view of learning explored throughout this thesis. The learning spaces are the result of the group of delegates coming together through networked learning to develop their own leadership practices.

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<sup>52</sup> I recently ran a learning and reflection session for the provider network (the 14 other providers delivering LEAD across the North West of England and Wales). During the day we agreed that we had ourselves created the four learning spaces through our own activities of that day.

In chapter 6 I discussed the influence of this research on my own practice. Theorising the four learning spaces as constructs and effects of engagement with the LEAD integrated learning model has also influenced my own practice. During the period of writing this thesis I have run a further five LEAD programmes and supported the provider network of 14 other institutions running LEAD. I am acutely aware of the learning spaces and have enhanced my own facilitation on and offline to create or at least nurture opportunities for the delegates to construct and experience the learning spaces. Additionally, I have been able to present this research to the other LEAD providers to help them better understand the learning processes within LEAD. On a practical level, these learning spaces matter because if the delegates of the other providers were not experiencing them, LEAD would not be working in the way it was intended. I propose a different way of looking at learning spaces which has not been conceptualised before within the networked learning (or other learning) literature. As effects of the learning community I argue that they matter because they can both help us understand the learning processes within networked learning better and they can be used like a litmus test to show how effective the learning community is.

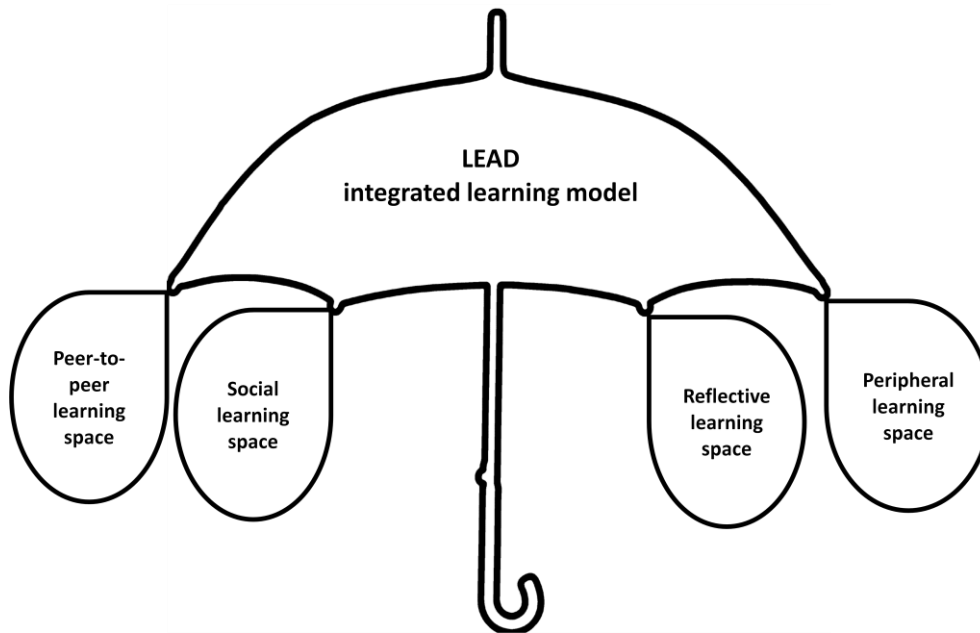
#### **9.4 The social construction of LEAD learning spaces**

The learning spaces are presented as effects of the delegates engaging with the integrated LEAD learning model. They are conceptual spaces which can happen in physical and virtual environments. They are conceived of as the following:

- (1) peer-to-peer learning space
- (2) social learning space
- (3) reflective learning space
- (4) peripheral learning space

The LEAD integrated learning model can be seen as an umbrella which has the potential to create learning spaces as shown in figure 17.





**Figure 17: Learning spaces as an effect of the LEAD integrated learning model**

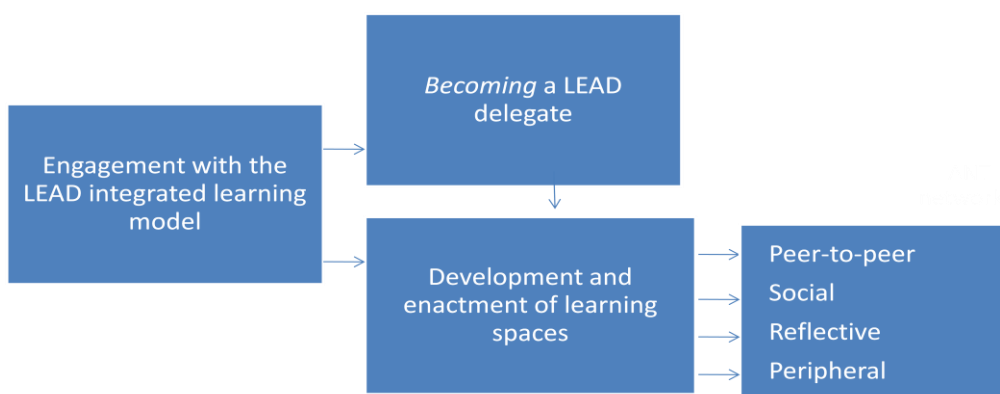
These learning spaces are presented as a way of looking at the taken for granted practices of the community and represent the social and cultural ways of being a LEAD delegate. They are conceived of as part of the social identity of LEAD although the following presentation of them through the vignettes is from the perspective of the individual. Table 6 summarises the attributes and social construction of each learning space.

<b>Learning space</b>	<b>Attribute</b>	<b>The social construction</b>
Peer-to-peer learning space	Peer-to-peer learning takes places across LEAD and is experienced as a space where the delegates share their knowledge and experience.	<i>This space is constructed dialogically between delegates. It occurs because their conversations are salient to one another. It is about all being ‘in the same boat’.</i>
Social learning space	The social learning space is made up of non directive spaces (not part of the formal curriculum) such as tea breaks, lunches, sharing lifts, meals organised outside of LEAD etc. It provides the opportunity for community bonding.	<i>This space is constructed with each other and because of each other. The space can be experienced in a physical setting (car journey) or virtually (discussions on the LEAD forum).</i>

<b>Learning space</b>	<b>Attribute</b>	<b>The social construction</b>
Reflective learning space	Reflection is an activity that takes place across LEAD but is perceived as a discrete space where the delegates undertake this activity individually and collectively.	<i>This space is constructed through double loop learning; the delegate questions assumptions and values and modifies them in order to make a change.</i>
Peripheral learning space	This learning space happens when the learning from LEAD ‘leaks’ into other areas of the delegates’ lives (home, work, family etc). This space also encompasses a future space whereby learning from learning continues once the programme has finished.	<i>This space is constructed when the delegates use their learning and apply it outside of LEAD or they behave differently in those environments beyond LEAD to how they would have done.</i>

**Table 6: Summary of learning spaces on LEAD**

These learning spaces stem from an interpretive analysis of the data and are presented as social constructions. I propose that the four learning spaces are a result of the delegates’ engagement with the integrated learning model and subsequently developing and learning the situated curriculum. I propose that it is through learning how to be a LEAD delegate that the learning spaces are developed, as shown diagrammatically in figure 18.



**Figure 18: Emergence of learning spaces**

The integrated learning model provides opportunities for engagement in different physical and virtual learning spaces. However, there is a difference between the physical and virtual learning spaces and the proposed conceptual learning spaces. Engaging with the learning interventions of the programme is a process that is visible, i.e. the delegates turn up at a master class, enter an online discussion forum etc. The learning spaces, on the other hand, are a *product* of the engagement with the integrated learning model. They are socially constructed by the peer learning community that is LEAD. An important point to make here is that they cut across the integrated learning model. As discussed above the concept of learning spaces is an alternative way of conceiving learning space within networked learning.

I show that each learning space is socially constructed differently.

## **9.5 Presenting the LEAD learning spaces**

The learning spaces are presented largely through an individual perspective but are representative of the community as a collective. If LEAD is working in the way it was intended then all of the delegates will experience all four learning spaces. In the following section I describe the attributes that define each learning space. This is followed by two vignettes in order to bring the space to life for the reader. The term ‘vignette’ is used in the tradition of Wenger (1990, 1998) who presents vignettes of a composite character through which he tells the story of a fictional day.<sup>53</sup> The character is a rhetorical device for Wenger to present some of his findings in a concrete, concise way. It is in this vein that I present the vignettes below which are based on real events but sometimes are an amalgamation of partial descriptions observed and multiple delegates’ words and experiences. They are written as amalgamations of real events of LEAD combining my ethnographic observations, interviews, general conversations, emails and online forum posts. It is important to note that the learning spaces are so intertwined that even in trying to write about them as discrete spaces they overlap. It would harm the vividness of the account to strip the interconnectedness out. The vignettes are followed by a description of how each learning space is socially

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<sup>53</sup> Although Wenger (1990) is keen to note that although the specific day never happened (and is thus fictional) the collection of events is real.

constructed. The aim of this is to show what structures differentiate each learning space and show each as an identifiable space in its own right.

## **9.6 Learning space 1: peer-to-peer**

The social theory of learning on LEAD relies on peer-to-peer learning. There have been some interesting comments by the delegates and observations about the benefits they are experiencing from being with a group of like-minded people and people who share similar issues. A lot of attention is given by the facilitators to creating a learning environment where trust and respect are fostered between the delegates. At the very beginning during the overnight experiential issues concerning confidentiality are addressed and the cohort creates a learning contract that is revisited throughout the programme. Similarly, within the ALS the delegates create ‘ground rules’ of behaviour and boundaries around what they want to discuss and where. These exercises help to lay the foundations for peer-to-peer learning which arises because the delegates feel they are in ‘the same boat’ and are not there to sell to one another or impress, rather they are there to seek help and share their own experiences. As well as sharing their experiences of the different elements of the programme they continue to be surprised at how similar the issues they face are and how their own situations as owner-managers of small businesses are relevant and salient to each other. The notion of salience has been discussed in more detail in chapter 8 (the situated curriculum). It is recognised that owner-managers often feel lonely and isolated (Smith and Peters, 2006), having no one around them who they can learn leadership from. Kempster (2009) presents a case for learning leadership through ‘notable people’ and how the self-employed have limited opportunities (and motivation) to observe notable people. LEAD provides them the opportunities to learn from one another, and the peer-to-peer learning space is a result of this.

Vignette 1 is an amalgamation of actual events within the observed ALS. I have purposefully not given detail about the actual issue being presented, firstly, because I promised the group I was not writing about their actual issues during my observations, and secondly, because I feel the content of the issue is superfluous and may detract from the question of where the delegates are learning within the learning space I am outlining.

Vignette 2 is an account of two delegates' presentation of their shadowing experience which they presented at the feedback from shadowing learning and reflection day. It is enriched with insights from emails and online forum posts from the same two delegates and their LEAD peers.

### *Vignette 1*

The set members are settled in a circle on the low, red, comfy chairs, there are seven LEAD delegates and the facilitator. There is no furniture in front of them so some have their legs stretched out. They look relaxed; some have their arms crossed above their head with their hands supporting the back of their heads. Others have their hands in their laps or are drinking cups of coffee. They are all looking at Adam who has been feeding back on his actions from the last set meeting. Adam explains that the decision he came to was probably the right solution in the end to which the facilitator interjects, 'it was your solution'. Adam says that he is very grateful to what he got out of the group last time, 'I've been sat on this for a year', he says, 'and now I've solved it very quickly.' The facilitator checks that they are ready to move on to Gaynor's issue. The set have decided to give equal time today to three members who have issues that they would like help with. The facilitator writes the timings on the white board for the air time and process review for each issue holder. The group know that the air time means this is the time for this issue holder to present the issue and for them to use an open questioning approach to help the issue holder think more critically about the issue and to hopefully come to some resolution or actions. The process review is time spent critically analysing the process of questioning and issue resolution.

Gaynor gets up to top her coffee up and Simon asks her to pass him a biscuit from the LEAD biscuit tin. Some of the others stand up to stretch or go to their bags to take out a pad and pen. They all settle back down. This time they bring their chairs a little closer to tighten the circle and most have pens in their hands, notepads on their laps. They fall silent and look at Gaynor to indicate they are ready to hear her issue. Gaynor spends ten minutes or so talking about her issue, what the history of it is and some factual information she thinks would be useful to share. The facilitator asks her what she wants from this session, she looks to the floor, thinking, and says, 'to shed some

light on this problem and to find a way through it'. The set begin to ask Gaynor questions. Initially, the questions are about getting more information on the issue presented and then they move more towards how she feels and what a solution would look like. Gaynor tells the group what a possible solution would look like and Francis asks, 'what information do you need to make this happen?' Gaynor nods enthusiastically and immediately says, 'yes, you're right, we need sales forecasts' and launches into a longer list of other information she thinks she might need. The facilitator checks whether this is the direction Gaynor wants to go down, she looks at her set members and says, 'I feel like talking it through is helping, I know you understand.' Adam laughs and says that her issue sounds extremely familiar and he then tells Gaynor a story from his own experience about an issue he thinks is similar to hers. The facilitator points out that this is unique to her own experience and turns to Gaynor saying, 'but will it work for you?' Simon, who has been quietly listening, responds instead, 'you've actually just given me an idea of what to do with my Manchester office, I hadn't thought of that before'.

The set work on Gaynor's issue for another twenty minutes during which time she has written down a list of actions she is going to take away. The facilitator draws this session to a close and asks Gaynor to share her action points. After she has finished the facilitator asks the set to move into the process review, specifically to reflect on what went well and what the set members might have liked to do differently. To signify a change between the air time and the process review the delegates push their chairs back a couple of inches to widen the circle. They are well practised at the process review, it's the air time and the questioning techniques they sometimes struggle with. They let Gaynor take the lead by telling the others how the process was for her. She focuses on the question Francis asked that triggered a list of possible solutions for her, 'Francis is good', she says, 'that question was the killer question'. The facilitator points out that Francis did not actually give her any advice, it was she who came up with possible solutions. Gaynor cocks her head to one side and says, 'yes, but by putting it that way I had more buy-in to getting the sales figures'. When Gaynor has finished the rest of the delegates take turns in sharing what they learnt from the process and how it had helped them. Francis says, 'I really enjoyed it actually, you've helped me have some idea on what we should be doing in my business even though Gaynor's issue was totally different. Listening to others helps

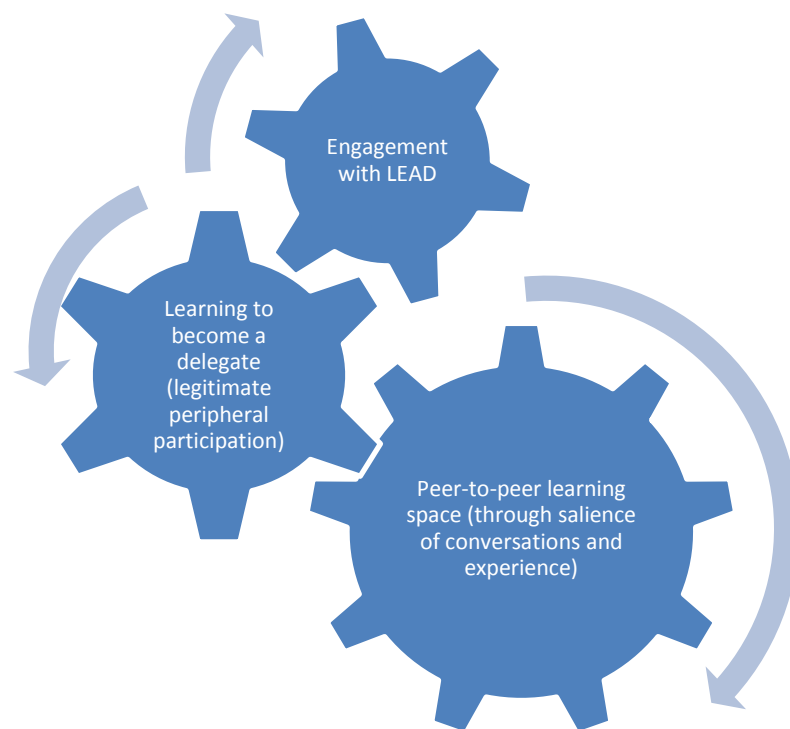
you think about your own decisions’. Similarly, Colin says he learnt a lot from this although he adds, ‘I was trying to solve Gaynor’s problem for her. I should have been thinking of questions that would have helped her’. The facilitator checks that they have finished the process review and suggests a ten minute comfort break before they get onto the next issue. Gaynor says, ‘pew, I think I need to go to bed now.’

### *Vignette 2*

Simon is standing at the front of the executive training suite, his fellow LEAD peers on round tables dotted across the room. Today the cohort has been hearing about each other’s experience of going into one another’s business for the shadowing. Simon had paired up with Francis within his ALS and had shadowed her for two full days literally running around as she seems to work at a hundred miles an hour running her two very busy children’s nurseries. Francis had also spent two days shadowing Simon whose business could not be more different, a high-tech engineering company. Simon pins up the poster he and Francis have prepared to demonstrate their learning experiences. Francis is sitting on the table in front of Simon having nominated him to speak on their behalf. Simon provides a brief overview of when and where they did their shadowing. Simon then says, ‘I realised that after visiting Francis I had the skills to run another business. I’ve always taken it for granted I only know mine. A lot of skills we have as managers or leaders we can transfer to other businesses. The biggest thing I got from going to Francis’s the other day was realising that I could run any business if I wanted to’. Francis stands up to join Simon and tells the rest of the group that she thought the shadowing experience was very powerful and thought provoking. She said she found it scary at first but after following the format it was not that difficult. There are nods of agreement from the other LEAD delegates. Francis turns to look at Simon and says, ‘when we did the feedback session I was amazed how much useful information I gained from such a relatively short investment of time’, she looks at the rest of the cohort and continues, ‘at first we spent only half a day in each other’s companies. I sat in on Simon’s management steering group. It really is powerful stuff to see how the situations you view by business shadowing have such similarity to your own business. I’m still thinking about it.’

### 9.6.1 Social construction of the peer-to-peer learning space

The peer-to-peer learning space is a result of the salience of the knowledge being shared between the delegates. It emerges through the practice of being both an SME leader and becoming a LEAD delegate. As shown in figure 19, the social construction of this learning space is a cyclical process whereby the SME leader learns how to become a delegate through the engagement with LEAD. This process leads to the construction of a peer-to-peer learning space through salient conversations with other delegates which in turn help the SME leader to learn how to become a LEAD delegate.



**Figure 19: The social construction of the peer-to-peer learning space**

In vignette 1 Gaynor says that she feels that talking through her issue is helping because she knows the members in her ALS will understand. Although her fellow set members cannot know her issue in the same way as she does, they share similar issues because they resonate with each other as leaders of small businesses. This can be seen when Adam says that Gaynor's issue sounds extremely familiar. He goes on to tell



Gaynor a story from his own experience about an issue he thinks is similar to hers. Their experiences resonate with one another and sharing stories is one way of helping to tackle their real issues and create new knowledge. This is similar to the ‘war stories’ that are shared with the photocopier technicians in Orr’s (1996) study of narratives in service work. Orr (1996, p.126) states that the war stories are artefacts to circulate and preserve and are told in pursuit of more purely social functions than diagnosis of technical problems. The stories shared between the delegates are the social construction of the peer-to-peer learning space.

Action learning rests on the premise that one person’s issue is unique to him or her (Revans, 1983). Gaynor’s issue is a case in point. The facilitator points out that this is unique to her own experience and asks Gaynor whether another member’s suggestion will work for her. The practice of being a LEAD delegate in this specific context of an ALS means that the delegates do not give each other advice. Sharing stories constructs the peer-to-peer learning space. In sharing their experiences the delegates begin to develop and highlight the situated curriculum as discussed in chapter 7. This example shows that one person’s issue can help another delegate think through his or her own situation, for example Francis says that listening to Gaynor’s issue has helped her think through what she should be doing in her own business. Explicitly she states, “Listening to others helps you think about your own decisions”. This learning space is experienced through the circulation of salient knowledge *and* the experience of being an SME leader.

## **9.7 Learning space 2: social**

There are spaces such as the refreshment break during the master class or lunch afterwards where lots of discussion takes place not only about the session they are attending but about their businesses and their own situations, and inevitably social conversations in general. This informal space alongside other spaces that the delegates create, such as meals out together, are conceptualised as social learning spaces. LEAD is underpinned by a social constructionist view of learning that assumes the learning is collaborative and knowledge co-constructed. The social learning space is experienced through social interaction that is not part of the formal structures of LEAD.

Vignette 3 represents a typical scenario before a master class. Vignette 4 focuses more specifically on a LEAD forum post seen through the standpoint of one LEAD delegate, Trish, who is a composite character.

### *Vignette 3*

Rob parks his car outside the leadership centre. He has driven here with Neil from Manchester. They often share lifts when coming to the university since they found out they only lived a few miles apart. The hour long drive gives them the opportunity to 'put the world to rights' discussing work issues, families, holidays and sharing their learning points from the various LEAD sessions as well as what cars they both want next. They are still talking about cars as they walk into the reception area. Rob goes to get a parking permit while Neil walks over to the cafe in the atrium where some other LEAD delegates from his cohort are already sitting in on the low red chairs drinking coffee in the bright and airy leadership centre. University students are walking towards the lecture theatres, hugging folders to their chest, staff members are arriving for work and the staff in the cafe are flat out meeting the needs of the long queue. There is always a buzz in the air when the LEAD delegates are in; it is as if they are hungry for conversations with one another. A smell of coffee fills the air. As Neil approaches the circle of delegates they look up and smile, Pete pulls up another red chair for Neil. 'How was your holiday? Looks like you had good weather?' Neil asks Pete making reference to Pete's tanned face. They talk for a while and Rob joins them holding two cups of coffee in plastic cups from the cafe and hands one to Neil. Rob spots the LEAD biscuit tin on the table and as he sits down, takes one to have with his coffee. Pete greets Rob warmly, shaking his hand and says that he has something he has been meaning to ask him. Neil shuffles over to make space for Rob. Neil turns to face Rob and explains that at the last master class he remembers Rob talking about putting an operations manager in place to free up his own time to work less in the business and more on the business. He is thinking of restructuring his own company and wants to do something similar but is not sure whether to promote from within or get someone externally. Rob tells Neil about his own experience and invites Neil to phone him if he wants to talk about it further. He pulls out his business card and says that his mobile number is on there. Neil thanks him and thinks to himself that these moments on LEAD are like a Doctor's surgery, only more fun. When Neil first

joined LEAD he felt like an impostor and was worried that he might not have a lot to offer the group as he thought his company would be small and less professional than the others. He realises now that despite their differences, they are all in the same boat. He has discussed this with Rob during one of their car journeys, about how he feels he can lay himself bare and nobody in this group would think he was a fool.

The LEAD administrator is walking around asking people to sign in, an obligatory piece of paperwork needed for attendance evidence for the funders of LEAD. When everyone has signed in she asks them to make their way to the lecture theatre where today's master class is taking place. They don't move in a hurry and the administrator laughs and says, 'it's like herding cats'. She asks them again and some begin to stand up still deep in conversation. As they walk into the lecture theatre they head to the seats they each prefer in this particular room. Today's speaker is behind the lectern looking through his slides. The room is filled with noise and no-one is in a hurry to finish their conversations.

#### *Vignette 4*

"Night Out!!!" reads the post on the online LEAD forum. Trish clicks on the link and sees that there are a lot of responses to this post. Trish is at home catching up on her emails, it's late, about 9.30pm. She closes her email account down and maximises the screen shot of the online discussion forum. The post was started by Mike who is suggesting that the cohort gets together 'outside of LEAD' for some drinks and a meal. There are many postings from his LEAD peers responding positively to this suggestion. Some have contributed with suggestions of booking a restaurant and some rooms in a hotel to stay over. Trish leans over to her diary and leafs through to the suggested date. She thinks it would be a good idea to have a drink or two with others on LEAD. She finds it hard to get to the university early as she has to drop the kids off at school on her way and it is even harder to stay for lunch afterwards as she has to get back to the office. As a result she always feels like she is rushing away while the others stay to talk and she thinks that staying must be quite good in helping the cohort bond. Like the others, she feels that being an owner-manager is lonely, a bit of a distant place sometimes. Having similar people to discuss similar type problems from similar type companies means a great deal to her and she feels she misses out on

this side of LEAD. She looks at the forum post, she's not very good at making posts on the forum although she does follow the discussions. She clicks 'reply' and begins to type 'Hi everyone. This sounds like a great idea. If I can sort out childcare count me in'.

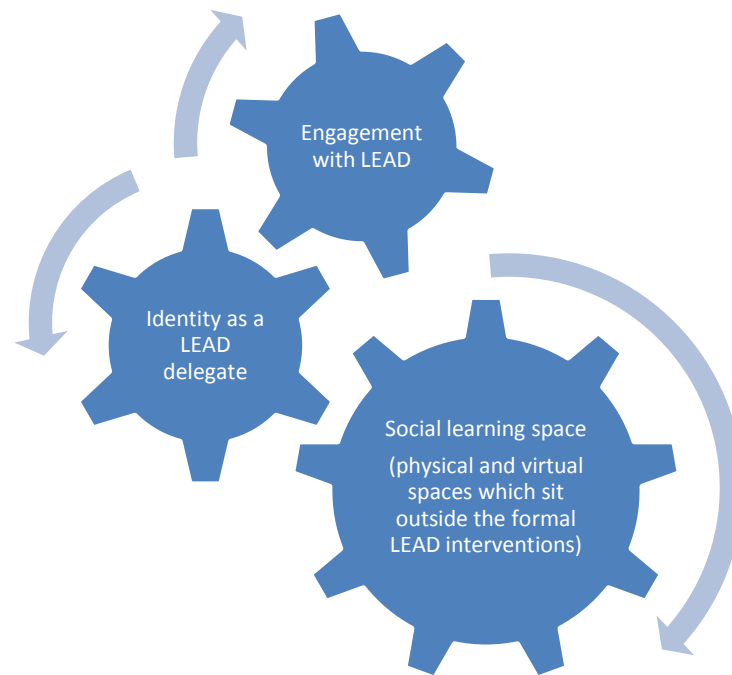
### **9.7.1 The social construction of the social learning space**

The social learning space is experienced outside of the formal or prescribed learning interventions of LEAD. It is experienced for example during the tea breaks at master classes, lunches, meeting up 'outside of' LEAD, lift sharing and online discussions about social events such as arranging nights out. In this sense the social learning space is more somewhere where the delegates gather socially either physically or virtually on the LEAD forum (or emails and other forms of electronic communication). Like all the learning spaces, the social learning space cuts across the integrated learning model. It is closely intertwined with the peer-to-peer learning spaces as I would argue that salient conversations are guaranteed to take place within the social learning space.

Figure 20 shows that the identity of 'LEAD delegate' is part of the construction of the social learning space. For example, if another set of students were to join in the tea break or an online discussion about a night out this would not be a LEAD social learning space. It is experienced because the delegates are LEAD delegates, they talk about LEAD and other non-LEAD conversations such as business issues, work-life balance and general social 'chat'. These all serve to construct and reaffirm their identities as SME leaders and LEAD delegates who are sharing this collective experience. It is a cyclical process because it happens continuously throughout LEAD.

Ponti and Ryberg (2004) offer theoretical reflections on the notion of place in networked learning. This is particularly relevant to the social learning space because they look at how learners develop and evolve a structure of social interactions in networked learning environments. They claim that social artefacts can be developed in order to help learners organise the virtual place in a way that is meaningful to them and helps foster their social presence. Social artefacts are "tools that play a part in constructing a sense of mutual accountability, belonging, negotiation of identity and roles between the learners" (Ponti and Ryberg, 2004). Examples of social artefacts

(which can also be seen as shared repertoire) for the LEAD delegates are the LEAD biscuit tin (which is part of the LEAD identity construction which is discussed below) and certain threads on the LEAD forum asking for and giving help and advice (which is part of the mutual accountability).



**Figure 20: The social construction of the social learning space**

Vignette 3 shows an example of two delegates, Rob and Neil, sharing a lift, which serves as a place where they come together functionally to car share but in addition offers the opportunity for them to not only discuss their learning from the programme but also to talk about other matters such as what car they want to get next. These apparent trivia help to consolidate their relationship as peers on the programme and extend the relationship to that of friendship. The social learning space then is part of the community maintenance of LEAD. Identity is central to the construction of the social learning space. This can be seen with the LEAD biscuit tin which serves to align the identity as a LEAD delegate ('I am a LEAD delegate therefore I have LEAD biscuits'). The delegates are very protective over the biscuit tin and if non-LEAD students dare to take a biscuit or help themselves to a cup of tea during a refreshment

break they are quickly warned off.<sup>54</sup> Even without the biscuit tin the social learning space is socially constructed through the identity of being a LEAD delegate. They occupy a social space (physical or virtual) because they are LEAD delegates and they share common ground.

### **9.8 Learning space 3: reflective**

I propose the act of being reflective creates a learning space. Reflection is an activity that is encouraged across LEAD, indeed there are whole days dedicated to helping the delegates understand and process their learning, aptly named ‘learning and reflection days’. This activity starts at the beginning of LEAD at the overnight experiential. The reflective learning space is conceived of as a space for processing information reflectively and often this results in self-affirmation, i.e. that they are doing some things well.

The following two vignettes represents a real day on LEAD and are a collection of actual events I observed on different days brought together to demonstrate this learning space. Vignette 5 provides a view of the learning space from the standpoint of a LEAD delegate and shows the struggle she has in developing this learning space. This learning space is an account of one LEAD session. Vignette 6 shows how this learning space develops in time with an example from the final learning and reflection day.

#### *Vignette 5*

This is the final day on LEAD, a learning reflection day. There is a kind of ‘last day at school’ atmosphere, most people are dressed casually and there is a lot of laughter and noise in the room. There are round tables set up in cabaret style with lots of coloured pens, post-it notes, bits of blue tac and everyone’s LEAD folders with bits of paper hanging out of them, strewn across the tables and floor. Half-drunk cups of tea and coffee along with empty wrappers from the LEAD biscuit tin are scattered across

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<sup>54</sup> The refreshment breaks typically take place in the leadership centre where many other students are present. The biscuit tin consists of biscuits which are not standard university issue and the delegates understand that they have been purchased specifically for them.

the room in ‘one big happy mess’. The walls are covered with flip chart sized pieces of paper depicting each delegate’s colourful interpretation of their own personal LEAD journey. At the beginning of the day the group set an objective to share stories and hear what each other has learnt and how. Greg has just finished talking through his LEAD journey and Alice is thinking about how similar her business issues are to Greg’s even though he runs a IT company, she, a hotel and restaurant. Diane offers to go next and stands up. The others know how much Diane hates talking in public and even though she is happy to speak up in her ALS, to speak in front of the whole cohort is still a big deal for her. She walks over to her poster and the rest of the cohort shift their chairs so they can see her LEAD journey. Diane wipes the palm of her hands on her jeans and tells the group how when she first came on LEAD she felt like an impostor, she thought that the others would expose her and find out that she didn’t know how to run a business after all. She tells them how she quickly realised that she was not alone and she was amazed to find out that others really do have the same problems. Her fellow delegates make affirmative noises, someone at the back jibes how she actually found out that they were all impostors. Diane talks through the road map she has drawn to visually depict her learning experiences. She tells the group how she has learnt that she was doing a lot of things right but that LEAD has taught her that she needs her own space to reflect to go forwards, “I reflect more. I’m more thoughtful on important issues in the business...rather than make a decision straight away”. Adam, who is sitting directly in front of her, catches her eye and nods in agreement as she continues, “I’ve learnt how not to do things. I’ve learnt that I need my own space to reflect to go forwards. Drawing this picture helped me think about this but I couldn’t have even thought that without having done all the reflection things and learning logs.” Adam chips in and says that he felt he has reflected throughout LEAD and not just in the designated reflective bits of LEAD. Diane closes by saying she doesn’t think she is an impostor anymore, in fact, she says she thinks she is rather good at running her business. She thanks the others for listening and quickly goes back to her seat, relieved to have done her presentation.

### *Vignette 6*

Rebecca has her learning log on her lap and taps her pen against her lips as she looks out of the window, it is raining heavily. It was good luck that the weather hadn’t

broken when she went running with the other delegates before breakfast. She's tired after an exhausting day yesterday, the first day of the overnight experiential. Everyone stayed up far too late in the bar and others look like they are feeling the effects of a late night and too much alcohol. There are a few sighs and Brian walks over to open the window a little to let some fresh air into the room. Not everyone is in the main room, some have gone to the armchairs in the lobby to write their learning logs and others are sitting on the windowsills in the big bay windows overlooking the gardens. It is very quiet, a contrast to the laughter, debates and 'getting to know' you conversations of the previous day. Rebecca turns her attention back to what she is supposed to be writing in her learning log. There are questions prompting her to think about what she has learnt so far from this two-day event and what she wants out of today and in the near future, from LEAD and from her business. This is the first time she can remember ever thinking about what she wants from the business. She starts to write about what she thinks she learnt from the experiential exercises yesterday. One of the exercises was about communication and sharing the vision. Rebecca realises that she has never actually thought about where the company is heading, let alone how or why she should share that with her team. She turns away from the window and asks herself why she is on LEAD and what she wants to change about herself and the business. As she puts pen to paper her thoughts begin to flow. It is a bit of a garbled mess but it doesn't matter because she doesn't have to share this with anyone else. She writes a few bullet points about what she wants from LEAD, including spending more time to think about the business, having a better work-life balance, learning from her new LEAD peers and to enjoy having some time to herself, away from the business to learn new things and be with like-minded people.

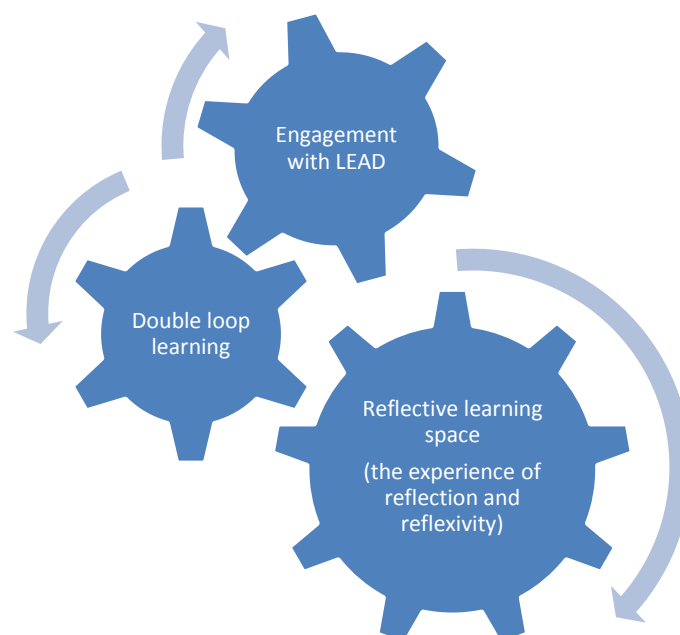
Soon, the rest of the cohort starts to fill the room and conversations begin. Rebecca feels she can't concentrate anymore so puts the lid back on her pen. She feels like she has unfinished business to deal with and hopes she'll find the time later to return to her learning log. Daniel and Mark take their seats next to Rebecca and they start to talk about filling in their learning logs. Daniel said he really didn't enjoy doing that as he hates sitting still and having to think, especially to have to go deep inside and ask himself some difficult questions, he would much rather be doing the activities outside, even if it is raining.



Later on the whole cohort is in the main room sat on conference chairs in a circle. They have spent the afternoon role playing an exercise where they took on identities of managers, workers and supervisors. The exercise is designed to create confrontation in order to stress the importance of the role of leadership and staff empowerment. Although it was a simulation the emotions are real and discussion is still going on about the exercise. The facilitator reminds them that the discussion is supposed to be about what learning came out of the exercise and what they will take back to the workplace rather than the ins and outs of the actual exercise. Mark has been quiet throughout the discussion but at the end he contributes by saying, ‘I’ve been sitting here reflecting on this and the activity is actually more useful than I realised at the time. The ability to be reflective is a new skill I am learning and I can see that I have a lot to learn’.

### 9.8.1 The social construction of the reflective learning space

Reflection is an activity that the delegates learn how to do across the programme sometimes with specific activities contrived to produce reflection. Figure 21 shows that the construction of the reflective learning space is the result of engaging with LEAD and experiencing double loop learning which leads to the reflective learning space. Like the other learning spaces, it is a cyclical process.



**Figure 21: The social construction of the reflective learning space**

In vignette 5 Diane says that she has recognised she needs her own space to be able to reflect and at the same time thanks the others for listening. Talking through her LEAD journey with the other delegates has helped her to reflect and therefore she is demonstrating that the reflective learning space is a product of this process. Proposing that the reflective learning space is both a cognitive and social process supports Lave and Wenger's (1991) view that situated learning is a bridge between cognitive processes and social practices. This link can be demonstrated through using Argyris' (1976) concept of double loop learning. A central component of his theory is the distinction between the individual's espoused theory and their 'theory-in-use' (what we say we do and what we end up doing). Typically, interaction with others is necessary to identify this conflict. In vignette 5 Diane says that she thought she was an impostor in her business demonstrating this as her theory-in-use. She then realized that a lot of the others also felt the same way and ended up thinking that she was rather good at running her business. In double loop learning, assumptions underlying current views are questioned and hypotheses about behavior tested publicly. Diane demonstrates this when she presents her reflections to the group.

In Vignette 5 Adam points out that he reflected throughout the whole programme and not just in the parts of the course that were designated as reflective activities. The reflective learning space happens as a result of the engagement with LEAD but extends across the programme and beyond. It is a result of the delegates processing their thoughts and making sense of their learning. This is then socially situated into their own contexts.

In vignette 6 Mark says that being reflective is a new skill he is learning. He has been reflecting on one of the experiential activities the group has just done and the facilitator is guiding them on how to pull out the learning in terms of what they can take back to the organization rather than the functionalities of the activity. In situations like this the facilitator plays a key role in helping to create the reflective learning space. Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 35) argue that learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world. The social practice here is reflecting, whether that is individually or with the help and guidance of a facilitator. The reflective learning space can be constructed individually or socially with other people.

## 9.9 Learning space 4: peripheral

In chapter 7 I discussed peripherality and have shown its importance and relevance to LEAD. Predominantly, delegates come on LEAD to develop themselves personally and professionally in order to grow their businesses. It is expected that learning from LEAD will be applied to their businesses and, because of the nature of small business leaders, it is natural to see LEAD impacting other areas of their personal lives too. In this sense LEAD often leaks into or infiltrates other spaces of the delegates' lives.

The anticipation of future learning is also considered to be part of the peripheral learning space, something that the delegates hope they will be doing. Many delegates across the cohorts plan to carry on meeting, whether this is formally such as a self-facilitated ALS or informally through social events. Over the last seven cohorts there have been a total of 24 ALS, and to my knowledge approximately eight sets still meet regularly despite LEAD having finished. Even when there isn't a formal arrangement to meet in the future some delegates still refer to the value in meeting again.

These two vignettes follow two LEAD delegates into their workplace. They are both an amalgamation of my own visits to different LEAD delegates' businesses enhanced with snippets from interviews, conversations and online LEAD forum posts. Vignette 7 shows Bevan in his family home. Vignette 8 looks at Chloe and her learning log.

### *Vignette 7*

Bevan's eldest, Katy, is fretting about her assignment for school today. She left it until the last minute as usual and the family are bearing the brunt of her bad mood. Normally Bevan would have given her his standard talking to about the consequences of not meeting deadlines. This morning he stops in his tracks, pauses, takes a deep breath in and asks Katy what a solution to this situation would look like. She is about to tell her Dad not to lecture her but then realises he has asked her a question and she thinks about it. She tells him that she doesn't want to feel stupid anymore. Instead of asking her why she feels stupid, Bevan asks when she has felt clever. He learnt this questioning approach from his coach who always turns the negative comments he

takes to coaching into a positive question. This makes Katy smile and she tells him about a time when she felt clever. Bevan asks her what she could do in this situation to feel clever. Katy simply leans up and gives her Dad a kiss on the cheek, says thank you and walks off. Bevan's wife looks at him bemused. He shrugs his shoulders and heads to work which is a short drive away.

As usual Bevan is the first one in. He likes to be there before his team arrives and lately he has been using this quiet time to think about how he is going to make sense of some of the things he has been learning on LEAD. He feels he owes it to his staff to share his learning and he promised that he would do something on a weekly basis to this effect. He is struggling today though as everything seems a bit muddled, it's not like he learnt three specific things last week that he can report back. Last week he had a master class and an ALS and at the time felt desperate to get back to the business to communicate with everybody so that they could see what he was learning but today things don't seem as clear. He has left his LEAD files at home. To him LEAD is a personal thing as well as a business thing so if there is anything to read he will do it at home. However, he wishes he had his file with him this morning as there was something from the last master class he wants to bring up with his finance officer. There is a knock on his office door which is ajar, it is Kerry the sales manager. They exchange pleasantries and Bevan asks her how the sales meeting went yesterday. She tells him it went well but she thinks someone in the team is underperforming and she wants to know what Bevan wants to do about this. Bevan turns the question back to Kerry and asks her how she would like to handle this situation. Immediately, Kerry lists some approaches she has already been mulling over. Bevan smiles and tells her this sounds good and asks her what she will do first and when.

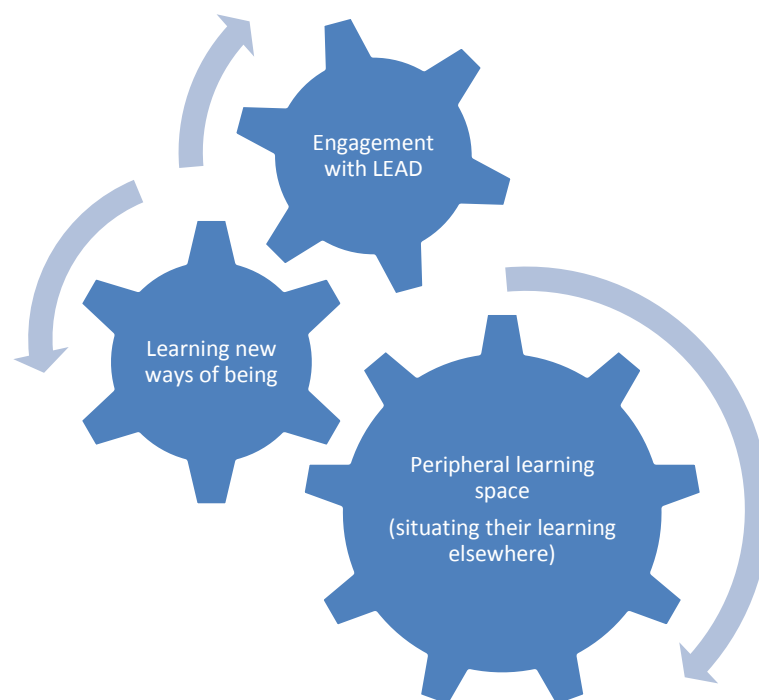
### *Vignette 8*

Chloe has been writing in her personal learning log. She has chosen to keep one online rather than on paper as her thoughts seem to flow better through typing. It's one o'clock in the morning and she has been looking through the forum discussions to help her gather her thoughts. She saw that Dan was also online and wonders what he was doing there at this time in the morning. She can't sleep, her head is full of the many things she wants to do with the company and in her home life. She definitely

has more energy and feels more interested in the company. She has also set herself some personal targets, including running a half marathon. She starts to write ‘I feel it’s been quite an intense 12 months for me. I don’t know if I’m unique in that but I really feel it’s been quite intense. Now with the time that I’ve had to give to LEAD I’m used to learning, I feel like I need something else now. And I know I’ve really enjoyed learning, I’ve sort of become quite addicted to that side of it and I really want to be able to learn more. So I don’t know what else is available to me’. LEAD is going to finish in a couple of weeks and she knows she will miss it. Although she tells herself she’ll be glad of the time as there is so much more to do. She thinks about the company in the future, it is going to be a different place in the next 12 months. She is going to be a different person.

### 9.9.1 The social construction of the peripheral learning space

This learning space is experienced when the delegates take their learning somewhere else, for example back to the workplace or into the family. Figure 22 shows that engagement with the integrated learning model also affects other areas of the delegate’s lives. The peripheral learning space is socially constructed through the process of taking the learning elsewhere.



**Figure 22: The social construction of the peripheral learning space**

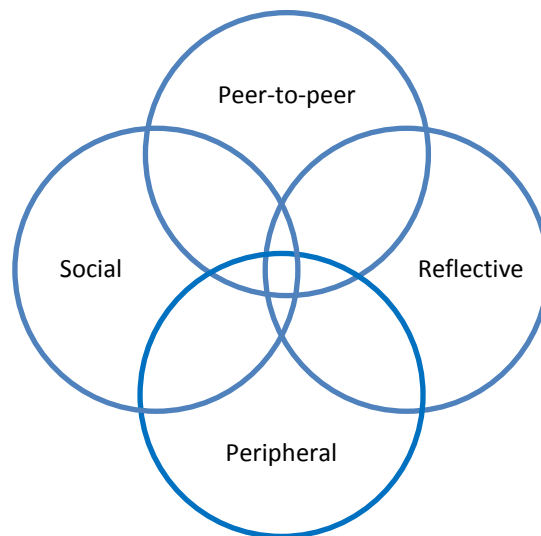
I argue that the social construction of the peripheral learning space can be seen through the alternative reading of legitimate peripheral participation as presented in chapter 7 (see section 7.4.1). I showed how the LEAD learning community has boundaries which are known to the members but other networks function on the periphery and enter into the LEAD community ‘legitimately’. These include other staff members, business partners etc, families and so on attending LEAD sessions. This alternative reading of legitimate peripheral participation suggests that wider (peripheral) networks shape the identity of the SME leader and influence their learning of leadership and how to run a business. In vignette 7 Bevan demonstrates that he is using the techniques he has learnt on LEAD at home with his daughter and in the workplace. The techniques of open questioning he has learnt from action learning and coaching are part of his identity as a delegate and are part of the situated curriculum of LEAD as discussed in chapter 8. The peripheral learning space is an effect of Bevan’s learning taken into other areas of his life.

CoP theory proposes that we have multi-memberships with various CoPs and the peripheral learning space demonstrates that learning can be taken from one constellation of practice to another. Wenger et al. (2009) demonstrate how an important function of one online community is to “provide a window onto the wealth of available information from outside sources such as scientific journals, websites, and relevant news stories” (p. 8). Peripherality then can also be concerned with information coming into the community as well as coming out from it. The learning space may also be considered to be what Wenger (1998) calls a boundary encounter whereby discrete events provide connections. Whereas Wenger uses boundary encounters to look at who is inside and outside of a CoP I use it here to show that the peripheral learning space can be understood in terms of the notions of periphery and boundary as found in CoP theory.

Having identified conceptual learning spaces in LEAD I now go on to discuss how the learning spaces are relational to one another; each space can be considered as discrete but can overlap with the other learning spaces.

## 9.10 Relational nature of learning spaces

The learning spaces have been presented as an effect of the network in ANT terms and an effect of legitimate peripheral participation in CoP terms. Although they were presented as discrete learning spaces they are heavily intertwined. The following diagram shows the relationality between the LEAD learning spaces.



**Figure 23: The relationality of learning spaces**

In addition to the relational nature of the learning space the learning across LEAD is also relational. As LEAD is based on an integrated learning model it is hard to separate out where the learning takes place (i.e. as a discrete experience). Examples of this include one delegate saying that she saw a pattern in her leadership going right back to the first ever encounter with LEAD (the overnight experiential) but that she didn't realise this until she had nearly finished LEAD. Another delegate notes that he took a point from his exchange project into his ALS and then on to coaching as he could explore the issue more fully and with different tactics. LEAD is more than the sum of its parts and the learning does not reside in any one part of the programme. During one observation of the ALS the delegates were referring to themselves as having telos, a concept which was used by a recent master class speaker. In the same session another delegate kept referring to wanting to create bigger hills for his staff to climb which was another concept from a master class.

This excerpt from my ethnographic diary during an observation of one of the ALS meetings demonstrates the relational nature of the LEAD interventions of action learning and coaching which in turn demonstrates the relational nature of two of the identified learning spaces, reflective and peripheral.

*Colin says that he felt that his issue didn't fit very well with the action learning set so he took it to his coach. The lesson, he says, for him, is that certain things are better for coaching. He goes on to describe what issues he felt were appropriate for coaching and action learning respectively. He explains what came out of the coaching to which the facilitator says, 'your reflection is very interesting'. Colin says, 'yes it is about what issues to bring here'. Gaynor has been listening, she puts her pen up to the front of her face, indicating that she has something to contribute and looks at [facilitator] for permission to speak. [Facilitator] nods and Gaynor remarks that she brought an issue to the action learning set which she says helped her to get more out of her next coaching session. That, she says, then helped her with a difficult member of staff back at work. Colin nods in agreement.*

**Excerpt from ethnographic diary, observation of action learning set (18<sup>th</sup> June, 2009)**

I propose that Colin is referring to the learning interventions on LEAD, those of coaching and action learning. He is making a value judgement about what is appropriate for the different learning interventions (*certain things are better for coaching*). I also argue that Colin is developing the reflective learning space (*your reflection is very interesting*) and that this reflective learning space crosses over with the peripheral learning space (*a difficult member of staff back at work*). The interaction and dialogue in the ALS in this example allow for the reflective and peripheral learning spaces to emerge.

LEAD is based on the premise that peer-to-peer learning will take place as demonstrated by the peer-to-peer learning space. As discussed there have been some interesting comments by the delegates and observations about the benefits they are experiencing from being with a group of like-minded people who share similar issues. The following is a post by Simon on the LEAD forum which is restricted to the other members in his ALS. It demonstrates the relational nature of the reflective, peripheral and peer-to-peer learning spaces:



*Just a quick line to say how much I enjoy the ALS [action learning set], both presenting an issue, and responding to someone else presenting an issue. For me, it has made me start thinking about my business more objectively, it is making me create time to think about issues we have and how to resolve them. It is also remarkable how similar some of our problems are.*

*Personally I have started to make changes to my business as a result of a combination of the ALS and all the other aspects of lead, and I am starting to feel liberated.*

*Before LEAD, there was a common objective I kept hearing which was 'to spend time working on the business rather than in the business' and I can really relate to that now. Also [master class speaker's] closing words - 'If not you who, if not now - when'*

**post by Simon on the LEAD forum in the ALS area, cohort 7, 15<sup>th</sup> January, 2009**

Peer-to-peer and peripheral learning spaces

Reflective learning space

Learning across the LEAD interventions

The learning spaces (and learning on LEAD in general) are bound up with the identity of being a LEAD delegate and learning and constructing the practices of the learning community. The construction of the self and identity is a relational process and the learning spaces are part of this. Hodgson (2008) argues: “In a social constructionist, ‘relational’ perspective of learning it is assumed we are constructed as selves and as identities in social interaction” (p. 159-60). The learning spaces are relational with one another which both supports Hodgson’s view of relational learning and is part of the construction of the LEAD delegate identity. Ryberg and Larsen (2008) explore the idea of a ‘networked identity’ whereby they hope to capture the richness and complexity of the relations we continuously engage in across contexts such as work, school, spare time, online or off-line (p. 112). The LEAD delegates’ identities are also located in a ‘complexity of relations’. Writing about LEAD, Robinson (2008) proposes four key relationships the LEAD delegates have, that is,

1. with themselves as a leader,
2. with their business in learning to lead it,

3. with their partners and staff in asserting the leadership role and stepping back from managing and micro-managing,
4. with the wider business community in relating with and learning from other small business leaders.

This supports the view that LEAD learning is relational with other spaces. Ferreday and Hodgson (2010) recognise that:

“learning does not take place in discrete spaces that are separate from everyday life: instead the learning space is structured by the unconscious, the messy and the emergent aspects of psychic and social life” (p.4).

The following LEAD forum post shows how one delegate recognises that LEAD is affecting other parts of his life:

*The strangest thing for me is not only is this working in the work place, but I also now find myself helping my children and coming out with some quite profound inspiring statements and it really works! Also in the gym I now know that I have still got a little bit more to give - we really do have a lot to be thankful for*

**Post by Paul on the LEAD forum, 8<sup>th</sup> June, 2009**

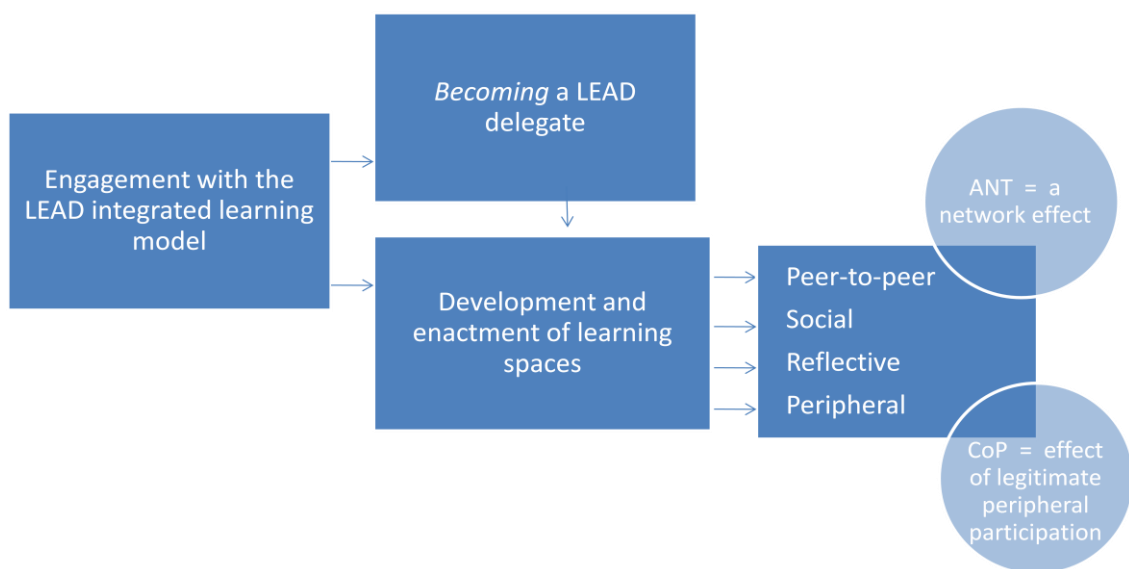
To summarise, the learning spaces are relational with one another and are effects of engaging with the integrated learning model. The learning on LEAD does not take place in discrete contexts and the learning spaces are also relational with the learning from the different learning interventions.

### **9.11 Using CoP and ANT to understand LEAD learning spaces**

This chapter is both analysed and presented differently to the previous two data analysis chapters. The analysis has been inductive and is not the result of applying the analytical lenses of ANT and SLT /CoP theory. However, the theoretical frameworks can be used to understand how the learning spaces are created from an ANT and CoP perspective respectively. Both frameworks have addressed social construction; for

example, ANT in terms of the social construction of scientific facts (Latour and Woolgar, 1979) and CoP in terms of the social construction of knowledge and learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Brown et al., 1989). I show how they can be considered to be a network effect in ANT terms and how they can be seen to be the result of legitimate peripheral participation in CoP terms.

Figure 24 below outlines these two points and I go on to demonstrate this drawing upon ANT and CoP:



**Figure 24: Learning spaces as a network effect and an effect of legitimate peripheral participation**

### 9.11.1 Using ANT to understand LEAD learning spaces

Fox (2005) demonstrates that learners and learning can be seen as network effects, they are a result of the actor-network. I argue that the LEAD learning spaces are also a network effect, they are a result of the LEAD actor-network. There are two points of relevance here, the first is the role of a socially and materially heterogeneous network and the second is the process of translation.

As discussed in chapters 7 and 8, conceiving LEAD as an actor-network involves consideration of humans and non humans. Accordingly, LEAD includes actors such as the buildings where the programme takes place, the online discussion forums and even

a biscuit tin. ANT theorists have shown that buildings can be mediators in organizing the relations amongst human actors and their environments (Yeneva, 2008). Others have shown that artefacts and objects account for a social, economical and psychological world and can even prescribe morality in the mediating of human relationships (Akrich, 1992; Latour, 1992). Yeneva (2010) describes how buildings can create the conditions to remind users of who they are, for example citizens, investors, neighbours etc. I argue that the learning spaces are a result of the engagement with the integrated learning model. This engagement includes attending sessions at the university and online through the LEAD forum. However, the university is not a place for learning because the buildings exist; the learning is an outcome of the socially constructed practices that take place in (and beyond) the buildings. This is part of the second point, translation.

I have shown how the process of translation is part of the construction of each LEAD cohort and the delegates' LEAD identity (see chapter 7 and 8). Fox (2005) shows how the process of translation is used by HE institutions to enrol people and translate them into learners. For LEAD, translation involves enrolling SME leaders and translating them into learners who develop a LEAD identity. The learning spaces are a result of the process of translation. Latour (1999, p.22) argues that ANT is a theory of a space in which the social has become a certain type of circulation. The learning spaces can be seen then to be a certain type of circulation as a result of the actor-network. Such effects are not the intention of an actor-network, i.e. the process of translation explains the enrolment of actors into the network and the stabilization of their identities rather than the intentions of the actors. ANT can be used to help understand the effects of the construction and mobilization of the LEAD actor-network. In other words the focal actor, as discussed in chapter 7, serves to align the interests of other actors rather than deliberately create learning spaces as conceived of here. The learning spaces emerge through the analysis of the data rather than a pre-existing set of concepts.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> However, in writing the thesis my understanding of the learning processes of the LEAD delegates has indeed influenced my practice with subsequent LEAD cohorts (see chapter 6 for a discussion of reflexivity in my own practice). Understanding that learning spaces are effects has influenced my role as enabler (chapter 8) whereby I try to create more opportunities for the delegates to experience the learning spaces. Because of this the learning spaces have become a set of pre-existing concepts!

### **9.11.2 Using CoP to understand LEAD learning spaces**

For LEAD to be seen as a CoP, there has to be a learning dimension. I argue that the process of becoming fuller participants through the process of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991) can help us to understand how the learning spaces are constructed and experienced. The learning spaces are bound up with the LEAD identity as SME leaders learn how to become LEAD delegates. I propose that the learning spaces are not latent, waiting to be occupied, rather, they are constructions. Chapter 7 showed how learning to become a delegate was a process of learning and constructing the situated curriculum of LEAD. I argue that the process of gaining full(er) participation as a delegate happens at different points for different delegates. The learning spaces are an effect of this process and will also be experienced at different points for different delegates.

The process of legitimate peripheral participation involves the circulation of knowledge. I have argued that the delegates' conversations are salient to one another and this is one aspect of learning when LEAD is conceived of as a CoP. From a CoP perspective the learning spaces result from the effectiveness of the circulation of knowledge amongst peers. Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 51) propose that participation is always based on situated negotiation and renegotiation of meaning in the world. This, they say, implies that understanding and experience are in constant interaction and are mutually constitutive. This situated negotiation happens across LEAD, which results in the construction of the learning spaces. In other words the learning spaces are a result of the practices of the CoP and the circulation of knowledge.

### **9.12 Summary**

This chapter is inductive in its approach and I have used the data to propose four learning spaces namely, peer-to-peer, social, reflective and peripheral. I have developed the concept of learning spaces to answer the question, 'where do SME leaders learn on LEAD?' Although the learning spaces were presented as discrete spaces they are deeply connected to each other. As such they can be viewed as discrete and relational at the same time. In ANT terms the learning spaces emerge as a

network effect and in CoP terms they are an effect of legitimate peripheral participation.

The arguments I have presented outlining both the concept of learning spaces and their social construction are one interpretation of the data. I propose that the reader can see how I arrive at these interpretations. However, that is not to say that you as the reader would not interpret the empirical data in an alternative or differently nuanced way. As Cousin (2009, p. 11-12) notes: “those who read my account will bring their own baggage to their interpretation. There is no stable meaning to be excavated.” I have presented the learning spaces and argued for their social construction through an interpretive analysis.

The concept of learning spaces within (and as a result of) a networked learning programme has implications for networked learning generally and specifically in relation to SMEs and knowledge exchange with HE institutions. I have argued that these learning spaces matter because they can contribute to our understanding of learning and learning spaces in networked learning. I have argued they can be seen as a very compelling way to rethink how facilitators in networked learning can support the learners. They are both constructs and effects of the learning community engaging with the integrated learning model. I have shown how engagement with the LEAD integrated learning model creates these four learning spaces which, in turn, mean the desired learning outcomes are being achieved. Additionally, I have shown that if the delegates of the other LEAD providers were not experiencing the four learning spaces, LEAD would not be working in the way it was intended. As effects of the learning community I argue that they matter because they can both help us understand the learning processes within networked learning better and they can be used like a litmus test to show how effective the learning community is.

The next chapter presents a set of learning and design principles for SME leaders and networked learning.

## **INTRODUCTION TO PART FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

This final part of the thesis presents the discussion and conclusions. Chapter 10 uses the findings from the thesis to present a set of learning and design principles for networked learning. These specifically relate to programmes for SME leaders and are relevant to the knowledge exchange initiatives through networked learning.

Chapter 11 draws the whole thesis together with conclusions and presents the main contributions this thesis has to offer. Finally, this chapter looks at the limitations of the study and opportunities for further research.

## **CHAPTER 10**

### **NETWORKED LEARNING PRINCIPLES AND SMEs**

#### CHAPTER 10: NETWORKED LEARNING PRINCIPLES AND SMEs

- 10.1 Introduction
- 10.2 Key learning principles of the LEAD programme emerging from this research
- 10.3 Contextualising the learning principles
- 10.4 Recommendations for networked learning programmes for SME
- 10.5 Summary and concluding comments

### **10.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to present key learning principles from the study. This thesis explored the learning processes of SME leaders in networked learning. One of the aims of this thesis was to use the findings to contribute to the practice of networked learning. Accordingly, this chapter brings the findings of the analysis together in the form of a set of design principles which have particular relevance for SME leaders but can also be used to inform the design of networked learning more generally. This is my contribution to networked learning and expands on the discussions presented in the literature review in chapter 5.

SMEs are a significant part of the UK economy with most statistics reporting that they make up to 99% of all businesses in the UK. Leadership is seen to be a key component to the success and survival of SMEs and thus a contributory factor to the economy. A flourishing small business sector is central to the vision of economic growth in the UK and universities are seen as one way of achieving this through knowledge exchange. This thesis has argued that networked learning has not been considered as an approach or method of knowledge exchange. Additionally, there has been limited empirical



work focusing on SMEs and networked learning. Networked learning has gained increasing academic and practical significance since the *E-quality in e-learning Manifesto* was published in 2002. Over the same period of time the knowledge exchange agenda also gained significant momentum<sup>56</sup>. The networked learning approach still has some way to go to fully realise its potential within and by the HE sector. Further, it has been underutilised as a learning approach within the knowledge exchange practices of UK universities.

This chapter first outlines the key learning principles of LEAD which have emerged from this study. Following this is a discussion which contextualises these findings with the debates within networked learning in relation to knowledge exchange. Finally a set of six principles is presented which can be used to inform the design of networked learning. It is important to note that this chapter builds on the rest of the thesis and therefore brings in many of the concepts addressed throughout it. It is thus presented in a way that assumes the reader will be familiar with the terms and concepts discussed in the previous chapters.

## **10.2 Key learning principles of the LEAD programme emerging from this research**

Using SLT/CoP theory and ANT as theoretical frameworks enabled a rich understanding of the learning processes within networked learning for SME leaders. The findings from this study are brought together here in order to contribute to the knowledge around designing for networked learning. They are presented as key learning principles through the following points:

### *SME leaders experience loneliness and isolation*

It is well documented that SME owner-managers / leaders feel lonely and isolated (see Smith and Peters, 2006; Jones et al., 2007). Research on the SME community has shown that these feelings are of the most pertinent issues owner-managers must face

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<sup>56</sup> It should be noted that many universities were engaged in knowledge exchange before the government developed an agenda for it. Certainly, the IEED has been engaging with and supporting businesses since its inception in the mid 1990s.

on a daily basis (LEAD evaluation document, 2006). Working for themselves, at the head of their business, they have no management team or board of directors to bounce ideas off, share stress and worries with, and set levels of achievement to aspire to (Smith and Peters, 2006). The participative pedagogy of LEAD ensures that responsibility for learning is shared across the SME leaders and educators. Creating multiple opportunities for the SME leaders to discuss their own experiences and issues in business is a central part of this. Ensuring that the SME leaders can come together (physically and virtually) can help to address the isolation and loneliness.

*Working with groups of like minded people is a rare opportunity for SME leaders*

The LEAD programme brought together SME leaders from across many different types of businesses. The delegates regularly commented on the rarity of being involved with a network of other SME owner-managers who were willing to support one another's learning. Additionally, they were often surprised by the similarity of issues and concerns between the businesses despite coming from different sectors/businesses. LEAD is a learning community underpinned with a participative pedagogy. Accordingly, delegates are encouraged to share their own experiences. Their experiences of 'networking' or being with a group of similar people are often ones which involve selling their services to one another or making recommendations for business. Networked learning programmes like LEAD can provide a different form of business network, one in which the SME leader can expose their issues and even fears rather than putting on a 'front' for selling themselves.

Robinson (2006) argues that the importance of relationship building and making the most of the peer support networks emerges quite early on in LEAD. She argues that this is a significant part of the learning process and that the formation of social networks is a significant trigger for further learning and action. The closed nature of LEAD as a networked learning programme (as opposed to an open online discussion forum or a business networking event for example), means that the delegates develop a learning experience relevant to each of them. The social view of learning advocates knowledge is co-constructed between the delegates rather than being transmitted or assimilated unproblematically from a more knowledgeable source. LEAD relies less

on taught content and more on creating opportunities for them to engage in salient conversations. This helps the delegates to develop a peer support network.

*Knowledge and learning are generated by and circulated within the learning community*

The integrated learning model underpinning LEAD was based on taught, observed, enacted and situated learning (see section 2.4). The main premise of the programme was that knowledge should be shared between the delegates. As owner-managers of businesses, collectively they had a lot of experience and knowledge to share. LEAD thus aimed to provide the delegates with opportunities to share this knowledge and develop their own leadership skills. Accordingly, a lot of attention was paid to developing their critical thinking skills and approaching issues through a ‘solutions focused’ approach using open questions. Although there were taught elements within the programme, predominantly through the master classes, the aim was not to produce a ‘one size fits all’ lecture series but to encourage the delegates to take away their own ‘golden nuggets’ in relation to their own situations. The delegates were then encouraged to share these golden nuggets with one another either verbally or online through the LEAD forum discussions. Membership in the learning community and the salience of experience helped them to share knowledge and circulate ideas.

*Trust enables learning and the construction of knowledge*

Enabling a trusted and safe environment is one of the aspirations of LEAD in order to encourage the delegates to share business issues rather than to sell to one another. Confidentiality and trust are brought up regularly throughout the programme but more formal processes are encouraged at the beginning (such as the development of ground rules in the ALS and establishing a learning contract which addresses what they mean by confidentiality during the overnight experiential). Laying these foundations helps the delegates to understand that this network is one where they can learn through asking for help and by sharing their own knowledge and experience.

Talking about SME managers and networked learning, Ponti and Hodgson (2006, p. 4) state: “managers and other social agents involved in the learning experience need to

get to know each other and develop positive attitudes towards each other". A lot of time was spent in the early stages of LEAD doing exactly this. The induction day and overnight experiential are designed to get the delegates to share their histories and experiences. Facilitated activities on the forum are also designed to get the delegates to share their histories of running SMEs.

### *The situated curriculum and identity*

LEAD has its own situated curriculum, with each cohort experiencing a nuanced version of the situated curriculum for that cohort. Wenger (1998, p. 83) argues that every community has a repertoire, which includes the discourse by which members express their forms of membership and their identities as members. Both the repertoire and the community's language can be considered to be part of the situated curriculum. The delegates learn to 'behave' in the different learning interventions through learning and co-constructing the situated curriculum. It is not learnt through old-timers passing their knowledge on to novices as set out in CoP theory, but is co-constructed across the delegates and facilitators dialogically and observationally.

The situated curriculum is part of the delegates' identity. Joining the programme as owner-managers of small businesses they often comment that at the beginning they do not feel like leaders, rather, they feel they are impostors. As they engage with the integrated learning model the delegates learn from one another and develop the situated curriculum. Through their participation they learn how to *become* delegates which, in turn, develops their own leadership capabilities and results in an increased identification with being a leader. Increased identification with leadership can be seen as a by-product of learning to be a delegate.

The pedagogical aims of LEAD are to help delegates develop their leadership capabilities. Identity is central in learning how to become 'better' leaders and is tied up with learning how to become LEAD delegates. To this end, to be a delegate means conforming to certain ways of behaving and therefore conforming to the situated curriculum. Challenging the situated curriculum makes it visible and becomes part of the practices of the community and is also part of its development.

### *Learning spaces emerge from engagement with the integrated learning model*

This thesis has argued that space can be reconceptualised in networked learning through the idea of learning spaces. The four learning spaces; peer-to-peer, social, reflective and peripheral, were presented as a way of thinking about the learning experiences of SME leaders. It was argued that the learning spaces are socially constructed and are heavily intertwined. They emerge from engagement with the integrated learning model and all delegates should experience the four learning spaces at different times throughout the programme.

The learning spaces show that LEAD as a networked learning programme is working in the way it was designed. They matter because they are 'evidence' that the pedagogy underpinning learning for SME leaders is appropriate. On a practical level this thesis has argued that the learning spaces can reflect whether LEAD is working in the desired way for the other 14 providers of LEAD.

### *Critical reflection and reflexivity is part of the construction of knowledge*

LEAD focuses less on teaching owner-managers to become leaders and more on developing their critical thinking skills in order to be able to develop their leadership capabilities. The facilitators were integral to the learning process and the construction of knowledge. Accordingly the LEAD team, including the facilitators, were critically reflective about their practice and reflexive in that their own practices changed because of this process. Engaging in reflexive practice meant that LEAD was continually reviewed throughout the delivery of each cohort and at the end. A result of this was that the programme constantly developed. Because it is not an accredited programme there was flexibility to change aspects of how it was actually run whilst remaining true to the underpinning integrated learning model.

### **10.3 Contextualising the learning principles**

The learning principles outlined above support much of the literature about networked learning. Networked learning draws mostly on theories supporting social learning and social constructionism in relation to technology-supported education. As such, LEAD,

and networked learning generally, is based on the relationship between teachers and learners, itself based on collaboration and co-construction of knowledge rather than on the relationship of expert and acolyte (see E-Quality Network, 2002).

The principles of networked learning promote collaboration and connectivity across networks enabling learners to take an active role in the construction of their learning experiences. Facilitators within networked learning are part of this construction. Cousin and Deepwell (2005, p.61) recognise that a difficulty for e-facilitators is that networked learning communities can form shared repertoires which can turn into congealed practices that are hard to change. This point is true of any learning community. Cousin and Deepwell (ibid) argue that there is:

“...a risk for educationalists wanting to promote network learning - or any other pedagogy - in that they too may congeal their ideas and practices into new and even oppressive orthodoxies.”

The learning principles and general findings have highlighted the importance of facilitators in the learner's experience. The term 'enablers' has been used, which resonates with networked learning's support for the 'guide on the side'. However, the concept of 'enablers' moves beyond the 'guide on the side' - arguing that facilitators are not only part of the co-construction of knowledge but help to create the environment for learning. Additionally, they help the members become fuller participants, gaining the identity of learner (in this case, LEAD delegate) as well as an increased identification with the thing they are learning (in this case, leadership). With some exceptions<sup>57</sup>, Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation has not been overtly used in relation to networked learning. The situated curriculum is part of the process of legitimate peripheral participation and networked learning has not been theorised in terms of having or constructing a situated curriculum. This thesis has argued that a situated curriculum is developed by all learning communities. Networked learning has crossed over with CoP theory and some writers have used CoP in relation to developing CoPs within networked learning. There is much focus within the networked learning literature on learning as a

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<sup>57</sup> See Petropoulou et al. (2008) for example.

dialogical process. Developing the situated curriculum is also dialogical but can also be learnt and developed observationally. For example, this thesis has shown that the members of the ALS learn that holding a pen up in front of their mouths is an indication of wanting to make, what they termed, an ‘observation’.

Hodgson and Reynolds (2010, p.598) suggest that networked learning provides a space for dialogue and interaction that supports the co-construction of knowledge, identity and learning. Our understanding about learning using technology is changing our ideas about learning spaces (see Oblinger, 2006). The learning spaces presented in this thesis are theoretical constructs which provide an alternative way of theorising space in networked learning. They can be used to inform our practices within networked learning. As such they can contribute to our understanding of learning and learning spaces in networked learning because they can demonstrate evidence of the desired learning outcomes, or at least activity related to them. Used in this way they can be seen as a very compelling way to rethink how facilitators in networked learning can support the learners. They are both constructs and effects of the learning community’s engagement with the integrated learning model.

This thesis has shown that there is very little written about SMEs and networked learning. There is little evidence from policy to show that networked learning can be seen as a viable method of knowledge exchange between SMEs and HE institutions. Although there is little written within policy about how networked learning can support regional development this thesis has shown how the networked learning literature can provide guidance on the design of networked learning for knowledge exchange (and thus regional development). This can help educators understand how a well thought out and pedagogically sound programme can achieve appropriate learning outcomes for SME leaders.

Networked learning is underpinned by collaboration and participation which complements the pedagogy behind LEAD to promote peer-to-peer learning between the SME leaders. Ponti and Hodgson (2006) propose that networked (management) learning can be relevant for SMEs since it recognizes the importance of social relations and the associated relational dialogue that underpins knowledge and innovation in specific business contexts. They recognise that relationship building is

developmental and starts with establishing knowledge and understanding of each other's views and histories.

This thesis has argued that networked learning should be seen as an effective method of knowledge exchange initiatives to leaders of SMEs. A key challenge here lies in the ability to design interventions that are cost effective and reflect the heterogeneity of micro businesses (Devins et al., 2005, p. 547). Similarly, Ponti and Hodgson's experience showed that putting their principles into practice was a challenge. They state:

“The participants involved seemed to be caught between two conflicting positions: on one side, they appreciated the opportunity to participate in a collaborative setting and to network with their peers; on the other side, they often called for a more structured and instrumental approach to solving their business problems” (2006, p. 6).

Utilising support from HE in general and through knowledge exchange initiatives is an ongoing challenge for both HE institutions and SMEs. SME leaders often do not know that business support is available or that programmes are being developed to meet their needs. Also, SMEs quite often do not engage with more traditional forms of education. The delegates enrolled on LEAD all have different levels of education. Similarly, universities are learning how to engage with SMEs effectively. Ponti and Hodgson (2006, p. 7) argue that despite the challenges involved, networked learning holds great promise for management learning in SMEs. The findings from this thesis suggest that networked learning is an approach that can achieve effective business support to SMEs. Networked learning focuses on connections between resources and people rather than delivery of taught programmes. SME leaders can utilise this approach in order to receive real-time business support. However, using networked learning as an approach to knowledge exchange needs consideration. Beaty et al. (2010, p. 591) propose that introducing networked learning into the curriculum and institutional educational practice “needs to happen not in isolation of the educational values and theory underpinning networked learning but rather alongside and informed by them.” If networked learning is to be used for knowledge exchange then the



principles presented here can be used to inform the design of programmes that can have relevance for SME leaders.

Knowledge exchange itself is not prescriptive. HE institutions have been encouraged by successive governments to develop activities whereby the exchange of knowledge can benefit businesses and lead to regional development. There are no hard and fast rules of 'doing' knowledge exchange. Many activities are influenced by the funding bodies which support this type of activity.<sup>58</sup> LEAD itself is part funded by the North West Development Agency which sets criteria around where the businesses can geographically come from, the size of business which can receive this funded support and whether funding is available depending on how much funded support that particular business has had in the past three years. This thesis aims to contribute to understanding better how HE institutions can support SMEs through knowledge exchange. Just as Jones (2002) asks whether there could be a policy for networked learning, this thesis asks whether there can there be a policy for knowledge exchange using networked learning.

At the time of submission of this thesis the role of universities was receiving much political attention, with tuition fees set to increase.<sup>59</sup> Additionally the Coalition Government<sup>60</sup>, which came into power during the latter stages of this thesis, announced the scrapping of Regional Development Agencies which have supported knowledge exchange through HE.<sup>61</sup> The function of universities working with their own local and regional companies through knowledge exchange initiatives remains unclear. Arguably, this research is even more pressing and relevant as it can inform policy in the area of university business support and knowledge exchange.

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<sup>58</sup> ERDF for example has strict criteria on what types of businesses to engage with and has sets of outcomes that each project has to deliver which focus on the number of jobs safeguarded and created as a result of the project. Lancaster university management school has worked with over 1000 SMEs through approximately £10m of ERDF funding over the last nine years.

<sup>59</sup> See [www.independent.gov.uk/browne-report](http://www.independent.gov.uk/browne-report)

<sup>60</sup> The Conservative Party and The Liberal Democrats

<sup>61</sup> See <http://www.englandsrdas.com/news/qas-on-the-future-of-rdas>

#### **10.4 Recommendations for networked learning programmes for SME leaders and knowledge exchange**

Design for networked learning is becoming increasingly significant for HE institutions (see Fox, 2005). The above discussion has presented some learning principles from this study which now feeds into this part of this chapter: recommendations for networked learning. These stem from the findings from this study plus the researcher's experience as a practitioner of facilitating and researching SME leaders' learning within networked learning. This section presents six design principles which are targeted at networked learning for SME leaders. However, they can also be used generally to inform networked learning and can be used as a basis for thinking about knowledge exchange initiatives with SMEs through HE. These design principles support and build on the work of Ponti and Hodgson (2006). SME leaders are at the top of the organization and although this could be true of SME managers (particularly in very micro SMEs) the leaders have little opportunities to learn leadership in a social context (see Kempster, 2009).

This thesis has shown that networked learning with and for SMEs through HE institutions is an underexplored area. Further, networked learning as a means of knowledge exchange is even less explored. Beaty et al. (2010, p. 586) urge us to share our practice of networked learning to enable the implementation of rich forms of the approach. The set of principles presented here responds to this call. It is important however to keep in mind that as Wenger (1998, p. 233) argues: "practice cannot be the result of, but instead constitutes a response to design." The design principles are not concerned with the design of specific activities within networked learning or the design of a technology; other authors have discussed this at length (see Jones and Dirckinck-Holmfeld, 2009; Goodyear et al., 2001, 2004; Jones 2007). Rather, they are offered as principles for the overall design to aid thinking about how knowledge exchange can use networked learning with SME leaders.

*Create opportunities to address the isolation and loneliness felt by SME leaders*

Networked learning programmes such as LEAD, designed for owner-managers/leaders, should focus on creating opportunities for the learning community to meet (physically and/or virtually). Creating time and space for conversations to develop with a focus on their businesses and issues/challenges/opportunities they are facing will help to alleviate the feelings of isolation and loneliness. Being networked with like-minded people who are ‘in the same boat’ will help the learning community to share their experiences and learn from one another.

*Be mindful of nurturing a ‘trusted’ environment which is confidential where the participants can ask for help and share salient knowledge*

Trust plays a major part in the learning community’s circulation of knowledge and its ability to allow for the members to ask for help and share their own business issues. Facilitators are part of this and should be mindful of (perceived and real) concerns around confidentiality. Many SME leaders are involved in networking and may know one another or each others’ clients, and trust and confidentiality are essential. Trust is integral to enabling real issues to be shared with the group and for the members to approach these issues with critical reflection and respect for one another.

*Be aware of the situated curriculum and how to work effectively with it*

All learning communities will have a situated curriculum. In networked learning the facilitators act more as the ‘guide on the side, not the sage on the stage’ (Jones and Steeples, 2002, p.9) and are part of the co-construction of the situated curriculum. The situated curriculum is part of the learner’s identity and of what Fox (2005) identifies as the translation of learners. This design principle advocates that we should understand the importance of the co-construction of the situated curriculum in the learning experience. On LEAD, the delegates participate in the learning interventions and, in doing so, co-construct the situated curriculum which is part of their learning to become a delegate.

The term ‘enablers’ has been used in this thesis to show how the facilitators create environments for learning<sup>62</sup>. Cousin and Deepwell (2005, p. 65) argue that a strong example of networked learning would allow blurred boundaries between students, tutors and other interest groups in the learning environment. The role of enablers is integral to the construction of the situated curriculum and in providing a positive experience of networked learning. Ponti and Hodgson (2006, p. 5) note that SME managers can co-construct knowledge with the help of experts and peers through participatory social practices. This is true of SME leaders within networked learning.

### *Support the process of legitimate peripheral participation*

We need to recognise that learners engage in a process of learning to become learners as well as identifying with what they are learning. This thesis has shown that learning how to ‘be’ a LEAD delegate brings them closer to fuller participation through Lave and Wenger’s (1991) account of legitimate peripheral participation. This, in turn, helps them to become better leaders in their own contexts. We should recognise that networked learning is underpinned by social theories of learning and that legitimate peripheral participation is a process we should expect to see. It is proposed that learners in networked learning should seek to achieve fuller participation as a learner in that practice. Depending on the focus of the networked learning programme they may be reaching fuller participation with another identity also (leadership in the case of LEAD). Enablers in networked learning should be aware that the learners’ identity changes as they move towards fuller participation.

### *Seek to support learning spaces*

With programmes such as LEAD which are based on an integrated learning model the four learning spaces proposed in this thesis should be experienced. These learning spaces will take place physically, virtually, individually or collectively. This thesis has theorised four learning spaces as a way of conceptualising learning and space differently within networked learning. In brief the learning spaces are identified as:

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<sup>62</sup> This should be the case for any programme but networked learning explicitly draws upon tutors as part of its collaborative approach to learning.

- The peer-to-peer learning space enables learning to take place through salient conversations. This is extremely important for SME leaders who typically have limited opportunities for discussing business issues with other SME leaders and for learning how to develop their leadership.
- The social learning space is seen as an effect of the delegates having opportunities to discuss social aspects physically or virtually. One practical recommendation is to ensure that the social learning space is nurtured, for example if the learning community meets physically then to allow for enough time for social conversations, e.g. over a refreshment break. The social learning space can be seen as part of the community maintenance of the learning community.
- The reflective learning space provides the opportunity to learn through reflection. It is part of the double loop learning process (Argyris and Schön, 1974) and is an effect of the approaches within networked learning to develop critical reflective thinking.
- The peripheral learning space is a result of the delegates situating their learning back into the workplace (or elsewhere, such as in family life). Wenger (1998) suggests that CoPs are connected with the rest of the world through their peripheral experience. The peripheral learning space demonstrates that LEAD is having an impact on other areas of the delegates' life. If the learning is being situated back into the workplace then the programme is achieving its desired learning outcomes.

It is probable that more learning spaces may emerge which have not been identified within this study. However, the principle of understanding learning and space in this way can be an important consideration when designing for networked learning. As educators we should seek to support learning spaces.

### *Design for critical reflection and reflexivity*

This thesis has argued that as educators, course designers and facilitators we need to be critically reflexive about our own role within networked learning and think about the role we play in the co-construction of learner identities. Ponti and Hodgson

(2006) state: “critical reflexivity is an important part of the learning process for evaluating and examining both the learning process itself and the resultant actions taken” (p.3). They argue that critically reflexive learning aims to go beyond the immediate context in which managers operate. This supports the approach to networked learning that advocates that learning is situated back in the contexts in which the learners can apply their learning. As educators we should recognise our own role in this process and in the collaborative learning approach and the construction of knowledge. In addressing networked learning with SME managers Ponti and Hodgson (2006, p. 5) argue:

“...facilitating means interacting to support them throughout the experience: to work with them to manage learning resources and to sustain their dialogue with peers and experts. This role is different from the one played by more traditional forms of face-to-face trainers.”

It is essential that any enablers are critically reflective and reflexive. It is recommended that that effort should be placed on developing critical reflection for the learner and the educator/facilitator.

## **10.5 Summary and concluding comments**

This chapter has presented findings from the study in relation to informing the design for networked learning for SME leaders. Although much has been written on design for networked learning, few texts have addressed the SME experience. The chapter culminated with a set of design principles. These principles have particular relevance for SME leaders but that is not to say that the principles are not relevant to other learners in networked learning. They are not prescriptive but can be used to inform the design of networked learning and have particular relevance to the design of knowledge exchange with SMEs and HE institutions.

Chapter 11 presents the conclusions to the thesis, bringing together the data analysis chapters, along with this chapter, to show what contributions they make. The chapter

also addresses the limitations of the study and highlights areas for future research in this area.

## **CHAPTER 11**

### **CONCLUSIONS**

#### CHAPTER 11:

#### CONCLUSIONS

##### 11.1 Introduction

##### 11.2 Contributions

###### 11.2.1 Theoretical

###### 11.2.1.i Contributions to SLT / CoP

###### 11.2.1.ii Contributions to ANT

###### 11.2.1.iii Contributions to Networked Learning

###### 11.2.2 Methodological

###### 11.2.3 Applied

##### 11.3 Limitations of this study

##### 11.4 Areas for further research

##### 11.5 Closing comments

### **11.1 Introduction**

The aim of the study was to explore the learning processes of SME leaders within networked learning. Specifically, the research asked: “how and where do SME leaders learn within networked learning?” Additionally, it explored how a networked learning community was constructed. The phenomenon under investigation was a management and leadership networked learning programme, LEAD. LEAD formed part of the knowledge exchange initiatives of the Institute for Entrepreneurship and Enterprise Development, a department in the management school at Lancaster university. The research explored the learning process through a qualitative approach underpinned by an (online and offline) ethnography and was supported by qualitative interviews, the researcher’s own reflections and other secondary data. The study was inductive and used the theoretical frameworks of ANT, SLT and CoP theory as lenses for analysis. The conclusions presented below are a combination of the results from the findings



alongside learning from the research journey itself and the impact on the researcher's own practice.

This research contributes to a number of areas but its main contribution is in developing a greater understanding of how SME leaders learn within networked learning. In turn a key objective is to understand what implications this understanding has for the design of networked learning for SME leaders and to deliver knowledge exchange. This thesis then contributes to our understanding of how networked learning can be used in HE to work with leaders of SMEs to develop their leadership practices.

This chapter brings the thesis together by firstly showing what contributions the research makes and why this is important, and secondly by presenting opportunities for further research. The chapter also considers the limitations of the study, as is inevitable of any empirical research.

## **11.2 Contributions**

This thesis makes its main contribution to the area of networked learning. However, the research journey has led to contributions to other areas as well. As a way of organising these contributions, they are presented under three headings: theoretical; methodological; and applied. I will summarise the main points within each that I have pulled together from the thesis and show why they matter.

### **11.2.1 Theoretical**

There are few studies which have combined ANT and SLT/CoP theory. In the context of networked learning, studies have drawn upon these frameworks separately, but not in conjunction with one another. Further, this joint approach has not been used to explore the learning process of SME leaders within networked learning. This study has combined these theoretical frameworks to analyse the learning processes within networked learning. This combination has led to the following theoretical contributions.

### **11.2.1.i Contributions to SLT / CoP theory**

#### *Alternative reading of legitimate peripheral participation*

The review of the literature highlighted that SMEs are part of many networks. The research showed that these networks have legitimacy in the role of the SME leaders' learning within the LEAD learning community. Conceiving LEAD as a CoP (Wenger, 1998) brings theoretical challenges which are seen to push the boundaries of SLT. The research explored an alternative reading of Lave and Wenger's (1991) legitimate peripheral participation whereby other networks were legitimately peripheral and influenced the learning of the LEAD CoP. Allowing 'others' legitimate peripherality and understanding their influence on the learning of the CoP is an important insight in understanding how the learning community learns and circulates knowledge. For Lave and Wenger (1991) the periphery is an important place for learning for new members of the community. This alternative reading highlights the importance of the periphery by looking at other networks which the SME leaders are inextricably linked with (their families, staff, other business networks, for example). The peripheral participation in this reading suggests that wider (peripheral) networks shape the identity of the SME leaders enrolled on LEAD and they influence their learning of leadership and how to run a business.

#### *Leadership development is a result of legitimate peripheral participation*

Many studies which use SLT/CoP theory, and those which particularly draw upon Lave and Wenger's (1991) legitimate peripheral participation, often show how individuals learn a particular skill or trade. This study has shown that SME leaders who have enrolled onto the LEAD programme learn how to become LEAD delegates, and their leadership development is seen almost to be a result (a by-product even) of their becoming, in Lave and Wenger's (1991) sense, fuller participants as LEAD delegates. With no management team or hierarchical structure, and sitting at the head of the company in the 'leader' role, the owner-manager has nobody around them to share thoughts with (Smith and Peters, 2006). As they engage with the integrated learning model underpinning LEAD, the delegates learn from one another (and the facilitators). Through their participation they learn how to become delegates which, in

turn, develops their own leadership capabilities and results in an increased identification with being a leader.

This is a theoretical contribution because fuller participation is seen in relation to the LEAD identity as opposed to the identity of 'leader', i.e. they are learning how to become LEAD delegates and leadership development happens because of this. This can have implications for the way in which educators support the shift in identity of students/learners and links to the notion of learning as a network effect discussed below.

### *Co-constructing the situated curriculum*

Using Gherardi et al.'s (1998) concept of the situated curriculum, the analysis showed how each cohort of LEAD had its own situated curriculum which was co-constructed between the delegates and the LEAD team/facilitators. Gherardi et al. (1998) use the concept of the situated curriculum understood as: "the pattern of activities that instruct the process socialization of novices in a context of ongoing work activities" (p. 275). This research has shown how each LEAD cohort is made up of novices (because they are all novices at being LEAD delegates). The situated curriculum is developed by the delegates in conjunction with the LEAD team/facilitators (which is linked to the concept of enablers discussed below). This is a slight departure from how Gherardi et al. (1998) have used the concept. They use it to show how novices are given sets of tasks which enable them to participate in the ongoing social interaction in order to become competent members of that specific context. Applying the concept of the situated curriculum to the practices of LEAD shows it is co-constructed rather than given. It was proposed that it is not learnt through old-timers passing their knowledge on to novices as set out in CoP theory but is co-constructed across the delegates and facilitators dialogically and observationally.

A general feature of the situated curriculum is its tacit nature. The analysis has highlighted the importance of challenging the situated curriculum and how the process of challenging surfaces it or makes it visible. Bringing the situated curriculum to the fore highlights the importance of learning to be a delegate. For Gherardi et al. (1998, p. 282) a novice must learn 'how to see'. The LEAD delegates learn 'how to see' with

help from the LEAD team and facilitators but also from each other. Using the situated curriculum has helped to understand how SME leaders learn, and this can contribute to our understanding of the situated curriculum itself and how it is constructed within a learning community.

As educators we should recognise that learners will learn and co-construct the situated curriculum at different speeds. This is not much considered within the literature and is a topic for further consideration. This thesis has argued that facilitators should recognise the different pace of the construction of the situated curriculum and try to be aware of the situated curriculum for the benefit of the learner.

### *Salience contributes to how CoPs learn*

Conceiving each LEAD cohort as a CoP has shown that the salience of the knowledge and conversations which take place between the delegates is part of how the CoP learns. The literature has shown that owner-managers often feel lonely and isolated, having no one around them who they can learn leadership from. The empirical data have shown that, upon joining LEAD, the delegates do not identify with leadership and do not feel like leaders. However, in practice they have a great deal of experience in running and being leaders of small businesses. The salience of the conversations the delegates have lies at the heart of the participative pedagogy of LEAD. The delegates' experiences resonate with one another, which leads to an increase in confidence and an affirmation of their identity as they move towards a shift in identity towards that of a leader. CoP theory addresses the circulation of knowledge but the debates in the literature do not usually address the salience of the experience and conversations between community members who are all old-timers in their profession (SME owner-managers / leaders) but newcomers to the CoP (LEAD delegates). This thesis has argued that the LEAD delegates learn through their dialogue with one another. Further, it is also argued that understanding how a CoP constructs and circulates knowledge can be used to help create more opportunities for learning in this way.

### *Constructing multi-organizational CoPs*

The review of the literature of CoPs highlighted that three areas had not been considered. The first is the construction of CoPs (although there is debate in the literature relating to the cultivation of CoPs). The second is CoPs made up of multiple organizations. The third is SMEs, since CoP theory has been used largely in relation to larger companies. This study has brought all three areas together and has sought to understand how a multi-organizational CoP of SME leaders can be constructed as a peer learning community.

The analysis showed how combining CoP theory with ANT helped to develop a better understanding of how a learning community can be constructed. The process of translation was used to show how the primary actor (the LEAD team on behalf of Lancaster university management school) stabilizes the interests of other actors (SME leaders) in order to enrol them into the network. This insight adds to understanding of the processes involved in constructing CoPs. It also allows non-human actors such as buildings, application forms and even a biscuit tin to have a legitimate role in this process.

Conceptualising LEAD as a CoP brings with it a fresh way of looking at the theory. The literature highlights that the application of CoP theory tends to be centred on learning a craft or with large organizations. SMEs are largely missing from the debates. This study has shown that a learning community made up of different SME leaders can be conceived of as a multi-organizational CoP. This approach is under-explored in the theory and can contribute to it accordingly. The findings show that a multi-organizational CoP can be successfully created for SME leaders but that trust is needed across the members in order to maximise the learning.

### *The role of enablers*

Combining ANT and CoP highlights the importance of the primary actor in stabilizing the identity of the delegates. It also shows the importance of the facilitators' role in networked learning in fostering opportunities for the delegates to learn from each other. Enablers act as the old-timers in CoP terms helping the newcomers learn the

practice of the community. Enablers create the environment and opportunities for learning. This is seen as a contribution to both ANT and CoP theory but it resonates more closely with CoP theory as enablers are part of the learning within the CoP. In ANT terms the enabler is the primary actor, Lancaster university management school, which ensures that the network is functioning.

### **11.2.1.ii Contributions to ANT**

#### *Translation of learners with learning as a network effect*

The literature review outlined in depth the processes within translation, which were used to demonstrate the resultant framework of an actor-network. Translation was used to understand the construction of the LEAD peer learning community. The analysis has shown that the LEAD delegates were translated from owner-managers to learners (and thus leaders). Although ANT is not a learning theory as such, Fox (2000, 2005) has used ANT to understand learning within a network and as a result of the network. ANT authors have argued that knowledge is a social product and that it may be seen as a product or an effect of a network of heterogeneous materials (Law, 1992). This thesis has shown how learning is a network effect. Using ANT (combined with SLT/CoP theory) to understand the learning processes of a peer learning/networked learning community is a new approach within this theoretical framework.

#### *The pace of learning within translation*

Within the process of translation ANT does not address the timescales of bringing actor-networks into being. This study has shown that enrolling the actors to create a LEAD cohort and aligning their interests and stabilizing their identities took place at different paces. Understanding the role of pace is something that ANT could take from this study. Learning was conceived of as a network effect and accordingly, learning takes place at different times and at differing paces across the community/actor-network. The analysis showed how the primary actor stabilized the interests of other actors. It is argued that room is needed for the identity of other actors to shift at different rates, i.e. the actors will not all be enrolled at the same pace or time, nor will their interests be translated into the network at similar rates. ANT does not explicitly

address this although there is evidence in some ANT case studies of translation of the different paces.

Further, the literature does not fully address the role of identities shifting once enrolment has taken place. The analysis has shown that once the delegates have gone through intersement and enrolment their identities continue to shift as they become learners and identify more fully with their leadership roles. The delegates experience a shift in their identity; they were enrolled as owner-managers, had their identities stabilized as LEAD delegates and experienced a further shift towards that of a leader. This shift takes place at different times for the delegates. The concept of pace and the shift in identity within the actor-network is a contribution to the theory.

### *Co-enrolment*

Using Callon's (1986a) concept of enrolment the thesis argued that a process of co-enrolment also took place. Co-enrolment was conceived of as the LEAD delegates working together to enrol one another to stabilize their identities within the actor-network. The analysis showed that in addition to the primary actor enrolling actors into the network there was also a process of co-enrolment happening. Theorising enrolment this way is new to ANT and arguably is a contribution to the theory. Co-enrolment can add to our understanding of how actor-networks are constructed. It is linked to a different set of ideas and concepts than the role of enablers as presented above as it is aligned more closely to ANT than it is to SLT/CoP theory.

### **11.2.1.iii Contributions to Networked Learning**

#### *Learning Spaces*

The main theoretical contribution this thesis makes to networked learning is that of the four conceptual learning spaces: peer-to-peer; social; reflective; and peripheral. They were presented as a way of looking at the taken for granted practices of the community and represent the social and cultural ways of being a LEAD delegate. It was argued that the learning spaces are socially constructed. They provide a different way of theorising space, learning spaces and learning generally in networked learning.

They are conceived of as the result of learners engaging with the LEAD integrated learning model. Conceptualising learning and space in this way can contribute to our understanding of learning spaces in networked learning because they can demonstrate evidence of the desired learning outcomes, or at least activity related to them. Used in this way they can be seen as a very compelling way to rethink how facilitators in networked learning can support the learners. They are both constructs and effects of the learning community engaging with the integrated learning model. If this engagement leads to the four learning spaces, it was argued that the programme under investigation in this study is working for the learners. It was argued that they are less visible and tangible than those discussed in the literature and, arguably, can be seen as the learning effects of any peer learning community. The learning spaces are the result of the group of delegates coming together through networked learning to develop their own leadership practices. Additionally, these learning spaces can be thought of in relation to the construction of identities. It was proposed that it is through learning how to be a LEAD delegate that the learning spaces are developed.

Additionally, it was argued that the learning spaces are heavily intertwined and relational with one another. They can be experienced at different times for different people and can take place all at the same time. Theorising learning spaces in this way calls for us to expand our concepts of space within networked learning. Drawing upon ANT and SLT/CoP theory, the analysis showed that the learning spaces can be conceived of as effects of the LEAD learning community. In ANT terms the learning spaces are network effects. In SLT/CoP terms they emerge because of the process of legitimate peripheral participation.

The learning spaces can be seen to have practical importance within networked learning. This thesis has argued that LEAD is achieving its desired learning outcomes if the learning spaces are experienced by the delegates. This is important because LEAD has been rolled out to 14 other institutions across the Northwest of England and Wales and they can look for evidence of the four learning spaces being experienced as a litmus test for whether LEAD is 'working' for the delegates.



### *The role of non-humans in networked learning*

Using ANT and SLT/CoP theory to understand the learning processes within networked learning has highlighted the importance of non-humans. ANT does this through the principle of general symmetry. The buildings and application forms are part of the translation of learners. They form an important role in the construction of the networked learning community and the maintenance of it. CoP theory also shows how non-humans have a role in a community (but not philosophically by allowing them equal amounts of agency as in ANT). CoP shows how non-humans can develop a shared repertoire. The biscuit tin was used as an example of the construction of the LEAD identity and part of the shared repertoire. Networked learning calls for connections between learners and resources. Accordingly, these connections will involve non-human materials of all kinds across different networked learning programmes. Recognising the role and importance of non-humans can contribute to our understanding of the social processes of learning within networked learning.

#### **11.2.2 Methodological**

##### *Virtual ethnography, supporting a traditional ethnography*

The richness of this study stems from the ethnography which was both a virtual and a more traditional ‘offline’ ethnography. The virtual ethnography was a result of following the methodological principles of ANT whereby the researcher followed the actors into all the available spaces. The virtual ethnography provided a wealth of data in the form of online discussions and individual learning logs. It complemented the offline ethnography which also generated rich data and gave the researcher first-hand experience of areas of the programme she wouldn’t normally have access to (such as the ALS). Being director of the programme, the researcher had legitimacy to be in the different areas of their learning (including some of the most private spaces such as the online learning logs). This level of access called for a high level of critical reflexivity which is discussed below.

The virtual ethnography has methodological implications. The thesis discussed the roll out of LEAD to 14 other institutions and how the research itself has been shared with

these providers of LEAD at the learning and reflection days which the researcher facilitates. It is argued that the LEAD forum can be used as a way of gauging how, where and when the proposed four learning spaces are taking place. Methodologically the LEAD forum can be used to support the providers in delivering LEAD to meet the desired learning outcomes.

### *Researching a CoP from within and being a reflexive practitioner*

The researcher had a dual role of programme director and researcher. This brought with it challenges and opportunities. Taking the concept of enablers: the researcher is also an enabler, creating the opportunities for constructing the situated curriculum and helping the SME leaders learn how to become LEAD delegates. This study has shown that as director of the programme and facilitator, the researcher was integral to the CoP. This experience can offer a methodological consideration of researching CoPs from the perspective of being a member within one. It is not claimed that the researcher was a member of the CoP in the same way as the SME leaders were (i.e. she was not an SME leader nor was she a LEAD delegate). However, she was deeply embedded in the CoP and had levels of access that may have been harder for an 'outsider' to gain. In fact, she almost had too much access, which affected the amount of time she was able to actually carry out the fieldwork.

### *Action research*

Being a reflexive practitioner and undertaking this research has resulted in elements of action research (although this was not the original purpose of the research). Action research is always geared to make a difference or improve practice rather than to produce theory (see Hammersley, 2004). This study has helped the researcher to understand better the learning processes of the LEAD delegates, which has impacted on how she has facilitated subsequent programmes since conducting the research. This has given her increased confidence in understanding what the delegates are experiencing and more importantly, why.

### **11.2.3 Applied**

#### *A policy for knowledge exchange using networked learning*

Just as Jones (2002) explores whether there could be a policy for networked learning, this thesis has provided fertile ground for a policy for knowledge exchange through HE institutions using networked learning. It has argued that networked learning is an effective way of developing the leadership of owner-managers of SMEs through a collaborative programme based on a participative pedagogy.

#### *Designing for networked learning: networked learning principles for SME leaders*

Design for networked learning is becoming increasingly significant for HE institutions. This thesis has shown that networked learning with and for SMEs through HE institutions is an under-explored area. Further, networked learning as a means of knowledge exchange is even less explored. Beaty et al. (2010, p. 586) urge us to share our practice of networked learning to enable the implementation of rich forms of the approach. The set of principles presented in chapter 10 responds to this call.

This thesis has argued that networked learning is a viable way of supporting SMEs through knowledge exchange initiatives. This research can help in the design of knowledge exchange and the design of networked learning for SME leaders.

#### *Networks, ties and latent links*

ANT and CoP recognise the relationships between networks and this thesis has shown how LEAD has latent links that can be re-activated once the programme finishes. When LEAD finishes, intuitively we would expect that the learning community to dissipate. Many of the delegates will move away from the community once it has served its purpose, that of leadership and business development. Jones et al. (2008) use latent links to show how some links are not yet developed or apparent, and this concept was used to show how they can also be something to be activated in the future, i.e. after the learning community has finished with its formal role. This has implications for networked learning as often when a course finishes so does access to

the VLE, but the LEAD VLE is open-ended. The open-endedness provides the opportunity for the members to communicate and come together in the future.

### *New understandings of how SME leaders learn in networked learning*

This thesis has shown that on joining LEAD, SME leaders feel isolated and lack the opportunities to learn leadership that their larger counterparts would provide. LEAD was based on a social theory of learning through which the delegates would learn leadership from shared opportunities. The salience of their conversations and their experiences underpinned the participative pedagogy and they learnt with and from each other. Understanding how to create a learning community that is of benefit and relevance to its members has helped to understand better the learning process of SMEs within networked learning.

### **11.3 Limitations of this study**

Like any other research method, ethnography has its benefits and limitations. A common criticism of ethnography is that it leads to an in-depth knowledge of particular contexts and situations that have little generalisability. However, an in-depth understanding can provide a richness of knowledge about a particular phenomenon that can be used to illuminate other contexts. The strengths, providing an in-depth rich picture over an extended period of time, it is argued outweigh the limitations, but it still needs to be highlighted that ethnography may be considered to have certain limitations.

Another limitation of this study and the ethnography is that the researcher cannot claim to be everywhere at once. Partiality is inevitable and as such the data collection and analysis needs to ensure reliability, validity, or trustworthiness. Qualitative research receives criticisms of researcher bias and subjectivity of interpretation. Some critics call for triangulation within ethnographic research. This thesis has argued for the postmodern approach, crystallization, presented by Richardson and Adams St. Pierre (1994).

A further limitation lies in the pace of change in the recent political landscape. As with any research project this study is time bound, existing in a certain time within a political landscape which celebrated and supported the knowledge exchange initiatives through HE. During the final stages of writing this thesis the political landscape changed dramatically. The Coalition Government, which came into power during the latter stages of this thesis, announced the scrapping of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). The previous Government viewed RDAs as having an active role in building bridges between business and universities across the regions. They were also instrumental in working with universities to provide business support to regional SMEs through knowledge exchange initiatives. At the time of writing, the future of the knowledge exchange agenda through HE remains uncertain. Additionally, at this time, the Browne report (Lord Browne of Madingley, 2010) was published and Parliament voted for an increase in tuition fees for universities. This policy is currently being implemented and will undoubtedly change the landscape of HE in England.

#### **11.4 Areas for further research**

The opportunities for future research highlight to some extent some of limitations of this piece of research. They are presented as opportunities because, firstly, they were unable to be explored in this thesis, and secondly, they emerged because of this study. They are all potential areas for research and it is hoped that some avenues will be explored and developed.

##### *The role of trust within CoPs*

There are a number of next steps for this research. One of particular interest to the author is that of the learning design in the construction and maintenance of the LEAD CoP. The role of trust between the SME leaders on LEAD could be explored further in relation to this and the processes surrounding knowledge sharing and learning.

### *Constructing a CoP with the LEAD providers*

The CoP created by LEAD has been proven to have had a positive economic impact. As discussed, this success has led to a £15m roll out across 15 providers (including Lancaster university) in Northwest England and Wales delivering LEAD to 1750 SMEs by 2015. The researcher is also consulting with the Australian government on a national tender to deliver a programme similar to LEAD. This provides a number of research opportunities. One which is of particular interest to the researcher is whether the provider network can be constructed as a CoP which shares learning on how to deliver LEAD with a remit of maintaining quality assurance. This is linked to the next point.

### *Developing a policy for knowledge exchange using networked learning*

A piece of research which is being undertaken by the researcher is concerned with the learning processes within the provider network. Within the UK there has never been an initiative of this scale (£15m of public money) and ambition (1750 SME leaders' leadership and management development). This research is embryonic but it was inspired by this study and seeing the power of combining the frameworks of ANT and CoP, which led to changes in the researcher's own practices. This thesis has helped to inform the providers about their own influences and also the opportunities they have in their own practices as LEAD providers. The research beginning with the provider network could be used to develop a policy for knowledge exchange using networked learning.

### *Innovation, learning and entrepreneurship*

The focus of LEAD is leadership but research could be undertaken with a focus on the entrepreneurial capacity of the delegate or the impact LEAD has on innovation within the company (a current interest of policy makers). Additionally, the IEED has a £3m knowledge exchange project focusing on innovation in SMEs. It would be very easy and very compelling to utilise networked learning within this project and research the processes around innovation.

### *Researching the non-starters, the 'drop-outs' and the tyranny of participation*

Some SME leaders do not get accepted onto the programme or they choose not to enrol after the interview process. It would be interesting to follow these people in tandem with researching a LEAD cohort in order to explore the impact (or not) of doing/not doing LEAD.

Over the course of LEAD a couple of delegates have dropped out of the programme. While this is an expected and inevitable reality of any programme (and even though the attrition rate was very low) there is an opportunity to explore the leadership development of the delegates who did not complete LEAD.

A similar line of inquiry could also explore the discomfort of learning. Ferreday and Hodgson (2008) have explored the darker sides of collaborative participation which they term the “tyranny of participation”. The tyranny of participation within LEAD has not been addressed in this research. Exploring this could open up new ways of thinking about how we support and construct learning opportunities.

### *Longitudinal research*

When LEAD dissipates some members stay together (through self-facilitated ALS or through the follow-on programme, GOLD<sup>63</sup>). This could be an area for further study and CoP theory and ANT could be useful lenses to approach this. Longitudinal research could be undertaken to look at the impact of knowledge exchange on SMEs. Most funding attached to knowledge exchange initiatives requires reporting on key performance indicators and formulas which calculate GVA (Gross Value Added, which is used in the calculation of Gross Domestic Product). The underlying assumption is that relatively short interventions can achieve economic growth for the region. Evaluation of LEAD has shown that its impact has economic benefit, but what delegates gain when they receive other forms of university and business support is underexplored.

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<sup>63</sup>See <http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/departments/Entrep/Projects/gold/>

### *Translating networked learning*

A finding which was not discussed in this thesis was that three delegates tried to implement a type of informal networked learning in their own companies. They all had ideas of connecting their teams with resources through an online discussion forum, but the concept received a relatively poor take up in each of the companies. An interesting area for research would be to explore informal networked learning (i.e. not a programme as such) and also the concept of translating (in ANT terms) the concept of networked learning into another context.

#### **11.5 Closing comments**

This thesis is a construction which in ANT terms is part of the process of my own translation. As researcher my identity is being translated from staff member to learner / student through to becoming (I hope) a Doctor of Philosophy in networked learning. This process involves the reader and the associated academic practices which act as obligatory points of passage. In honour of recognising this as a closing comment, the researcher, Susan M. Smith would like to thank the readers for being part of this process of translation.



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