

Chapter 21

Creativity in Action: Creative Multimedia SMEs in Manchester

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the concept of communities of practice (CoP), with reference to ethnographic data from a range of creative multi-media SMEs (small and medium sized enterprises) in Manchester in the UK. The central argument is that many of these communities are profoundly mediated by the interplay of competitive commercial imperatives with professional obligations and constructions of identity. Hence, the concept of community is a more fragmented and fractured one. Ultimately, CoP is a robust metaphor to analysis organisational life but more descriptive detail of situated lived practices and mundane realities of various work settings is called for. Ethnographic data is drawn on to demonstrate the participant's accounts of their lived experiences, which include reflections on the process of creativity, collaborative negotiations with clients and organisational learning. Ethnomethodology, a form of sociological analysis, is then used to suggest alternative ways to analyse the situated nature of practice, learning and community.

INTRODUCTION

The central argument in this chapter is that the concept of communities of practice (CoP) can be useful in displaying some features of practice, which in my case are creatives working in multi-

media SMEs (small and medium sized enterprises). This includes, in complex and shifting ways, their sensibilities, loyalties, habits, obligations and allegiances to a professional discipline (e.g. web designer, learning technologist, programmer etc). However, CoP is less robust in analysing the competitive nature of their 'lived realities and experiences', which is often driven by 'just in

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time' business pressures and resources constraints. In this sense, these communities are far more fractured and informed by commercial rather than pedagogical imperatives. The tensions and contradictions between, broadly put, social learning and commerce is articulated in the strategies of participants in the way they describe, reflect on and legitimate their occupational image and situated practices as a creative in their field.

Ethnographic data is drawn on to demonstrate the participants accounts of their lived experiences within multi-media SMEs, which includes reflections on the process of creativity, collaborative negotiations with clients and managing business realities. Ethnomethodology is used to broadly inform the theoretical position taken as regards situated decision making, situated reasoning, collaborative negotiations, organisational accountability and tacit knowledge.

This chapter is organised into five broad sections. The first section outlines the research context. The second section outlines some significant and related and relevant literatures on organisational learning, creativity and communities of practice (CoP). The third section, explores some interview data around the 'lived experiences' of creative's working in multimedia SMEs in Manchester. The fourth section offers an ethnomethodological gaze on the topic as a rich way of reflecting on the situated nature of practice and learning. The final section draws together some concluding reflections and suggestions.

THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

The discussions in this chapter initially emerged from SMILE (Skills for the Missing Industry's Leaders and Enterprises), a research project sponsored by the ESF/Adapt-University for Industry in 2000-2002. The aim of this research was to evaluate the range of management skills within small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in the North West of England, specifically those

producing multi-media educational and training products. The research was undertaken by a multi-disciplinary team of social scientists, based at the Manchester Metropolitan University. The research was ethnographically driven and centred on a series of case study organisations, with the predominant use of in-depth interviews with key members of staff in multimedia SMEs (Small and Medium Sized Enterprises) in the Manchester area. It is widely recognised that such creative industries are a strategic and growing sub-sector in the UK economy. The project aimed to take stock of the current management skills in place, identify skills gaps and make some recommendations for learning and development within these firms. The ideas within this chapter build on previous published work from this project (Banks et al, 2002; Russell et al, 2003, 2004).

Within post-industrial economies, the creative industries have been identified as a new and fast growing industrial sector. The reasons for their emergence are manifold and complex. We can however point to a number of key factors that, we argue, are driven by processes of globalisation and the convergence between the traditionally distinct spheres of economy 'and' culture. The term, creative industries, hints at this resolution of opposites; the blending of the historically separate worlds of culture and economy, or art and commerce, to form a new and hybrid sector.

Put simply, as globalisation drives the simultaneous expansion and fragmentation of markets and increasingly volatile patterns of demand, we see firms placing greater emphasis on developing their creative and innovative capabilities, in order to stay 'cutting edge' and 'ahead of the pack'. Thus, traditionally cultural or artistic values of creativity have become more integral to economic production. This is one form of convergence. This process is not, however, uni-directional – in that the economic has now become more central to the cultural sphere. The commodification of art, music and other forms of cultural expression, has proceeded apace, as recognition spreads that the

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