Revisiting ‘how we learn’ in academia: practice-based learning exchanges in three Australian universities

Paul Hodge\textsuperscript{a}, Sarah Wright\textsuperscript{a*}, Jo Barraket\textsuperscript{b}, Marcelle Scott\textsuperscript{c}, Rose Melville\textsuperscript{d} and Sarah Richardson\textsuperscript{e}

\textsuperscript{a}Discipline of Geography, School of Environmental and Life Sciences, University of Newcastle, Newcastle, Australia; \textsuperscript{b}Australian Centre for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Studies, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia; \textsuperscript{c}School of Historical Studies, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia; \textsuperscript{d}School of Social Work and Human Services, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia; \textsuperscript{e}School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

Ideas of ‘how we learn’ in formal academic settings have changed markedly in recent decades. The primary position that universities once held on shaping what constitutes learning has come into question from a range of experience-led and situated learning models. Drawing on findings from a study conducted across three Australian universities, the article focuses on the multifarious learning experiences indicative of practice-based learning exchanges such as student placements. Building on both experiential and situated learning theories, the authors found that students can experience transformative and emotional elucidations of learning, that can challenge tacit assumptions and transform the ways they understand the world. It was found that all participants (hosts, students, academics) both teach and learn in these educative scenarios and that, contrary to common (mis)perceptions that academics live in ‘ivory towers’, they play a crucial role in contributing to learning that takes place in the so-called ‘real world’.

**Keywords:** experiential learning; practice-based learning; communities of practice; learning theory; community engagement

**Introduction**

The question of ‘how we learn’ continues to inform scholarly debate. Increasingly, attention has moved away from what Beckett and Hagar (2002) refer to as the ‘front-end model’ of education, with its emphasis on formal ‘academic’ learning, towards a more participatory and situated treatment of the learning process. In this article, we draw on research focusing on student placements, what we call practice-based learning exchanges, to explore the multiple ways in which ‘we’ – academics, students and workplace hosts – learn. Our primary aim, quite simply, is to learn more about ‘how we learn’ in the context of practice-based learning exchanges.

Given the engaged and practical nature of practice-based learning, we turn to experiential (Kolb 1984) and situated (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) perspectives on learning to begin our exploration. These approaches emphasise the value of experience as the key source of learning, and are useful in explicating the contingent and diverse characteristics of learning in student placements. While we find these accounts

*Corresponding author. Email: sarah.wright@newcastle.edu.au*
The empirical evidence suggests that learning in the case of student placements is too eclectic to be placed entirely within these existing perspectives of learning. For instance, the educative scenarios (the term we use to represent students’ eclectic learning experiences) explored show that experiential learning models underestimate the extent of multidirectional learning flows and co-learning in practice-based learning exchanges (Meyers 2005; Wright, Suchet-Pearson, and Lloyd 2007), while situated learning cannot account for emotional and transformative learning elements evoked through some student placements.

Indeed, our attention on the importance of multidirectionality in learning suggests that all partners in the exchange – hosts, students and academics – have flexible and important roles as teachers, facilitators and learners. Experiential and situated learning models have conventionally sidelined academia as an important contributor to situated and experiential learning, yet attention to the role of all partners to the exchange suggests a need to incorporate the role of academia in analyses. In the light of this, and that the practice-based learning exchanges are mediated through university coursework, a secondary aim of the article is to propose a more nuanced and multifarious representation of ‘academic’ learning than the ‘ivory tower’ proposition – remnants of which pervade some situated learning theories, workplaces and, indeed, universities. In this sense, the empirical findings compel us to move beyond the contrasting ‘metaphors of learning’ (Sfard 1998) that posit universities as primarily ‘acquisitional’ (and formal) and workplaces as ‘participational’ (and informal). We find that, contrary to common (mis)perceptions that academics live in ‘ivory towers’, they play a crucial role in contributing to learning that takes place in the so-called ‘real world’ of workplace practices.

The research presented in this article, which is part of a larger research project, was conducted over three Australian universities: Melbourne, Newcastle and Queensland. The findings presented here come from the qualitative component of the broader research project, based on semi-structured interviews with coordinating academics, students and workplace hosts at the three universities. The project examined undergraduate and postgraduate courses and stretched over seven degree programs.

The article proceeds with a brief discussion of the methods used to obtain the research data, followed by a literature review of two social learning models. This includes a synopsis of the various ways that both experiential and ‘situated’ learning models have been adopted in a variety of educational settings. The article then provides a detailed account of the multilayered and multidirectional characteristics of learning, drawing on specific examples from the practice-based learning exchanges examined as part of the broader study. We then reflect on how the educative scenarios emphasised throughout the article help build on our understanding of learning. Finally, we return to the question of formal learning, and the role of the university, to argue for a more nuanced characterisation of learning in contemporary higher education.

**Methods and approach**

Our focus in this article on the question, ‘how do we learn?’, suggests a constructionist framework. This epistemological bearing underpinned the preference toward qualitative and interpretive approaches. In essence, we were interested in the way meanings were constructed by the various participants as they engaged with the experiences they were interpreting (Crotty 1998). Hence, it was important to get a sense of the dynamic
and negotiated realities (Minichiello et al. 1995) these approaches bring into view. Accordingly, while this research is drawn from a larger project that incorporated a longitudinal survey of 230 students, ex-students, hosts and academics, our focus here is on the in-depth interviews that formed one component of the study’s multimethod approach. In-depth interviews were conducted with 17 staff, 14 students and 31 hosts from seven degree programs at three Australian universities. A short description of the programs and the practice-based learning exchanges activities in each is given in Table 1.

The practice-based learning exchanges represented in the project were diverse in terms of the activities undertaken, length of placement and in the ways they were officially described. Different courses included references to ‘student placements’, ‘internships’ and ‘project-based fieldwork’. In terms of the range of activities engaged in by students, project-based fieldwork consisted of marketing and analysis projects aimed to support Indigenous-owned businesses. Student placements and internships involved longer-term exchanges where students participated to varying levels in the functioning of organisations. The characteristics varied markedly between these diverse activities, which required broadening the conceptual terrain typically used to explain educative links between universities, community and industry.

Our examination of learning exchanges meant that it was important to interview participants from each of the three sectors involved in each learning activity. The interviews were designed to draw out how each partner in the educative scenario

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree programs involved in the practice-based learning exchanges.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Bachelor of Arts (BA, University of Melbourne) – students can choose to undertake a placement in a range of government departments, non-governmental organisations and private corporations, where they are supervised to undertake a specific project, often involving research on a mutually agreed topic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Bachelor of Development Studies (BDS, University of Newcastle) – students take an elective project-based fieldwork component in a final-year course through which they work with Indigenous owned and run businesses in the Northern Territory (University of Newcastle 2008).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Bachelor of Environmental Management (BEM, University of Newcastle) – students take an elective placement course where they enter into an association with a cooperating host organisation to further develop their expertise in management of environmental projects and issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Bachelor of Human Services (BHS, University of Queensland) – students undertake a compulsory placement of 400 hours of on-the-job observation and professional training under the supervision of an experienced practitioner within a human service organisation (University of Queensland 2008b).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Bachelor of Social Work (BSW, University of Queensland) – students are required to complete 980 hours of supervised placement in either non-government or government organisations to meet professional accreditation standards (University of Queensland 2008a).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Master of Public Policy and Management (MPPM, University of Melbourne) – students elect to undertake an internship with an organisation which either has governmental responsibilities or deals with government, where they work under the supervision and guidance of a senior manager in the organisation (University of Melbourne 2008a).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Master of Cultural Materials Conservation (MCMC, University of Melbourne) – students undertake a placement in a conservation department or practice which deals directly in the conservation of materials of their specialisation. They work under the guidance of a senior conservator within the workplace (University of Melbourne 2008b).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
learnt and taught throughout the activity and its follow up (Le Heron, Baker, and McEwen 2006). All participants, whether involved as students, academics or hosts, were recognised as having multiple memberships in different ‘communities of practice’ (Lave and Wenger 1991). In the semi-structured interviews, discussion centred on the concepts of learning, teaching, engagement, self-reflection and relationships. In particular, we focused on practices and processes, and the relationships associated with the learning exchange. Specific questions asked about the day-to-day activities, tasks, learning expectations and relational developments between participants. As they relayed stories of particular practices and situations within different work/learning environments, they helped to build a rich picture of the experiential and situated aspects of learning.

The transcripts were thematically analysed using both inductive and deductive lenses (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). We read for insights relating to themes identified through the literature, particularly questions of experience-led learning and situated learning practices, using these concepts as a frame to understand and analyse the data. In large part, the respondent quotations used to explicate the educative scenarios were representative or typical of the kinds of sentiments experienced by the participants. We also, however, read for divergences and unexpected themes that emerged from the interviews, employing a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Here our intention was to explore ways that learning deviated from, or went beyond, recognised models.

The research also involved a process of self-reflection, as several of the researchers were themselves teachers and coordinators of activities involved in the study. This meant participant observation and critical self-reflection complemented the formal interview process. Indeed, the multiple roles held by authors in the study served to underpin the flexible and multiple positionalities of all involved in the learning activities (Gibbs, Angelides, and Michaelides 2004; Wright, Suchet-Pearson, and Lloyd 2007). The authors both learnt in different ways (as researchers, as teachers improving their practice, and as lifelong learners) and taught through different sites with different approaches to different audiences (through distribution of results, in the classroom and in the field).

**Developments in ‘social’ learning theory**

*Experiential and ‘situated learning’ models*

As an experience-led schema, experiential learning makes explicit the participatory and sequential characteristics of the learning process (Atkinson and Murrell 1988; Kolb 1984; Rogers 1969). Drawing on Dewey’s (1938) seminal work on the importance of experience to learning and Rogers’ (1969) initial conceptualisations on applied knowledge and practice, Kolb (1984) developed an experiential learning model which proceeds through four cyclical modes. *Concrete experience* involves immersion into the immediacy of an event and relies on the individual’s emotional response and intuition. *Reflective observation* entails an impartial perspective towards a learning event based on reflective consideration. *Abstract conceptualisation* involves an individual’s logical and rational thought, as observations and reflections are integrated into a theory or learning concept. Finally, *active experimentation* includes action and participation as the individual ‘tests’ the learning concept by engaging in new experiences or events, benefiting, therefore, from the reflection–observation–conception sequence.
The focus on experience, participation and practice in Kolb’s learning schema similarly underpins developments in situated learning theory, though with a rather different emphasis (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). While experiential learning models primarily focus on an individual’s developmental change, situated learning theories emphasise the contextual or ‘situated’ nature of learning as a result of co-participation among others within communities of practice. Lave and Wenger (1991) use the term legitimate peripheral participation to describe the way that learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners, and that their participatory trajectory leads toward full participation in the socio-cultural practices of the community. Legitimate peripheral participation provides a way to talk about and explain the multiple relations between what they refer to as ‘newcomers’ (apprentices in the case of Lave and Wenger’s research) and ‘old-timers’ (those adept at the workings of the particular community of practice).

In this evolving schema, legitimate peripheral participation explains both the development of knowledgeably skilled identities in practice and the reproduction and transformation of communities of practice. The latter consists of and depends on a membership, including its specific biographies/trajectories, relationships, and practices. So legitimate peripheral participation involves the production of changing persons and communities of practice, central to which is participation as a way of learning – of both absorbing and being absorbed in – the ‘culture’ of the community of practice. Two ways in which this ‘absorption’ takes place is through language (learning how to talk in the manner of a full participant) and through ‘storytelling’. Both forms of communication, one involving the exchange of information necessary to maintain activities, the other serving the function of establishing situated community lore, serve to construct a new identity for the newcomer. For example, as old-timers relay stories of difficult cases or shared predicaments among other old-timers and newcomers, these narratives become packages of ‘situated knowledge’. Such stories constitute a vital part of diagnosing and reinterpreting shared practices while fashioning forms of memory and reflection. For newcomers then, as Lave and Wenger (1991) state, the purpose is not ‘to learn from talk as a substitute for legitimate peripheral participation: it is to learn to talk as a key to legitimate peripheral participation’ (109; emphasis in original).

While Lave and Wenger’s initial elaboration of situated learning theory prioritised legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice, Wenger’s (1998) subsequent work focused more specifically on the construction of identities in relation to these participatory communities. In broad terms, Wenger considers four components of a theory of learning: meaning, practice, identity and community. Regarding community, he offers three constitutive parts: mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire. These aspects of communities of practice add to their cohesion, adaptation and transformation. In terms of ‘identities’, Wenger elaborated on the way learners simultaneously participate in several communities of practice as they maintain a ‘multi-membership’ or boundary identity. According to Wenger (1998, 254–55), it is the boundary identity of multi-membership ‘that create[s] new interplays of experience and competence, they [boundary identities] are a learning resource in their own right … It is on the boundaries that old ideas find new life and new ideas propagate’. One of the characteristics of boundary relations is ‘brokering’: the connections provided by people who introduce elements of one community of practice into another that constitute the likely locus of the production of new knowledges.
One area where Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger’s (1998) work has been both critiqued and developed is on the issue of power relations in communities of practice (Carlile 2004; Contu and Willmott 2003; Fuller et al. 2005; Handley et al. 2006; Huzzard 2004; Roberts 2006; Yanow 2004). While Lave and Wenger (1991, 36) acknowledge the complicated nature of relations of power within the social structures of legitimate peripheral participation and the potential for conflict (Wenger 1998), authors, including Wenger himself (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002), have begun discussing the ‘downside’ of communities of practice analysis vis-à-vis power. Fuller et al. (2005), for example, highlight the way barriers to learning are created or removed by those who control organisational resources and knowledge production, and how this can facilitate or hinder participation (see also Handley et al. 2006). In a similar way, Carlile (2004) notes the constraints on newcomers should full participants view the former as threatening to transform the knowledge and practices of the extant community. The negotiation of meaning that underpins these power dynamics brings to light the contestation and hierarchies that often manifest in workplaces (Contu and Willmott 2003).

Adapting social learning models – examples within educational settings

While experiential learning models have proliferated since Kolb’s (1984) initial conceptual work (Atkinson and Murrell 1988; Kolb et al. 2005; Niemantsverdriet, van der Vleuten, and Majoor 2005; Meredith and Burkle 2008; Parilla and Hesser 1998; Ryser, Halseth, and Thien 2009), we argue that it is situated learning theory’s specificity regarding the workplace and articulation of ‘peripheral participation’, social embeddedness, identities, and relationships that mark its conceptual appeal, particularly for student placements.

A number of authors have recently drawn on Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) to highlight new learner participation and identity formation in situated work practices (Cousin and Deepwell 2005; Dahlgren et al. 2006; Hodkinson 2005; Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2004; Reid et al. 2008; Viskovic 2005; Warhurst 2006, 2008). Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004), for example, focus on secondary school teachers to examine the relationship between an individual learner’s positions and dispositions, and their working and learning within the workplace community. In their account, teachers learn through practice and participation within the ‘situated’ and collaborative cultural spaces of the department’s community of practice. They highlight changing teacher identities as they draw on past learning trajectories, both their own and the department’s, and their desire to belong as full participants in the community of practice. Reid et al. (2008) similarly emphasise the ‘situated’ nature of identity formation in student career development as they engage in active and liminal professional activities. The authors focus on the knowledge systems, including the social practices, histories, skills and discourses involved in shaping and reinforcing professional communities of practice. According to them, psychology students partake in the co-construction of clinical knowledge and solutions through co-participation with full participants.

Warhurst (2006, 2008) also adopts key features of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) in discussing the learning experiences of new university lecturers, as they engage in legitimate peripheral participation and the social meaning-making manifest in identity transformation. Warhurst (2006) emphasises the way early career academics often learn more through peer collaboration (among other new lecturers)
than through formal academic development courses. He also notes the way new lecturers ‘broker’ between their teaching development community (their peer group) and the situated practices of the broader departmental communities of practice. Warhurst highlights the interplay between different learning communities of practice, as new lecturers partake in social and individual learning toward full participation as seasoned academics.

While these contemporary examples of situated theorising affirm the ongoing utility of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger’s (1998) concepts in educational settings, few have drawn on their work when analysing, specifically, university internships or placements, opting instead for experiential models to explicate empirical findings. For instance, Cornelius et al. (2008), while referring to Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder’s (2002) notion of multi-membership in communities of practice in their discussion of online ‘virtual’ notion of multi-membership in communities of practice in their discussion of online ‘virtual’ placements, adopt experiential modes of analysis when illuminating their examples.

As exponents of experiential learning, Parilla and Hesser (1998) applied the experiential model to explain how students reflect upon, analyse and critique their experiences in workplace settings. Learning comes about as students ‘link’ established concepts to new situations, thus acquiring alternate knowledge. This acts as a catalyst for deeper investigation into a topic which can then inform workplace practices. In this way internships often generate new insights which have the potential to be incorporated into ‘real’ community developments (see Nyden et al. 1997). Meredith and Burkle (2008), similarly, draw on experiential models to emphasise students’ learning experiences in ‘real cases’ of workplace problem solving. Using a ‘consultancy teamwork approach’, the authors explain how small groups of students work with companies in identifying real problems in order to analyse them and offer solutions. Their emphasis is on filling the student ‘learning gap’, between the abstract conceptualisation and reflection of the university and the practical experience and experiment evident in industry.

‘Highly diffuse, deeply relational’: practice-based learning exchanges in three Australian universities

In this section we draw out the richness of the experiences of students, hosts and academics, and the contingent and situated ways learning took place. Unlike the predominantly student and ‘newcomer’ centred focus of experiential and situated theorising, respectively, we incorporate what constitutes ‘learning’ for these other key players – hosts and academics – in the three-way learning flow enabled by the practice-based learning exchanges (see Wright, Suchet-Pearson, and Lloyd 2007). We also look at those aspects of learning that sit outside extant models of learning theory, particularly experiential and situated models. This takes the form of transformative and emotional elucidations that occur as students, in particular, ‘connect’ with different people, places and experiences.

We adopt the term ‘educative scenarios’ in order to capture the expansive range of learning experiences indicative of the student placements. We prefer ‘educative scenario’ over ‘learning scenario’, because the latter invokes a more intentional sense of instruction and association (Beckett and Hagar 2000, 2002). ‘Educative’ is taken up here to broaden the scope of possible learning experiences, including unintended or unexpected ones, and those which may evoke transformative elements. ‘Educative scenarios’, therefore, need not require collaboration with a person as such, but may,
for example, entail a relational connection with a certain environment mediated through the practice-based learning exchanges.

**Legitimate peripheral participation: relational and social embeddedness in the practice-based learning exchanges**

In the process of undertaking a myriad of work practices, students found themselves both absorbing and being absorbed in the ‘culture’ of the community of practice within which they were placed. In many cases across the seven degree programs, co-participation in practices with workplace employees, both formally (work-related) or informally (social), gave students an insight into the ways that knowledge circulation acted to produce and reproduce communities of practice. Workplace hosts consistently reflected on this feature of situated learning. One MCMC host, for example, discussed this in terms of their ‘operative framework’. Students’ comprehension and understanding of the scope of work and role of the conservator, in this case, relied on their co-participation in and experience of ‘how a busy lab functions’, referring here to collegial interactions. Similarly, another MCMC host highlighted the specificities of conservation’s learning curriculum, emphasising ethical responsibility acquired through student participation in work practices with specialists. Moreover, the host stated that it is through this co-participation that students gain a ‘broader understanding of conservation practice, ethics and responsibility towards collections in their care’.

The reproduction of ethical and responsible situated practices, as a circulatory feature of communities of practice, was similarly demonstrated in both the BA and BDS programs. For example, in the case of the latter, student situated learning involved cross-cultural awareness in an Indigenous setting. As one BDS student identified when reflecting on their own positionality and non-Indigenous identity during their project placement:

> I think it’s probably mostly cultural sensitivity and how to actually apply that. I think you’re quite aware of that when you’re studying things like that, and aware that they are different and they do have different approaches to things, but until you’re in a setting like that you don’t know how you would actually apply that yourself … [The project placement provided] more of a practical hands-on basis of knowledge of the impacts that western culture has had on Indigenous people.

This culturally responsible situated practice, as an example of the circulation of a specific knowledge, was also evident in the BA program, which again involved learning cross-cultural awareness as a key relational component of co-participation. Reflecting on the situated practice of sensitivity, one BA host referred to ‘a sense of responsibility’ that came with doing their work, especially when ‘we have them engage with partners that are working overseas’. This is particularly critical for fostering relational longevity with these colleagues, and hence the importance of student reflection on ‘bigger ethical questions around what are we doing, why are we doing it and how this is being done’.

This socio-cultural ‘absorption’ in the community of practice also involved a participatory trajectory. One MPPM Host, for instance, described the educative scenario of legitimate peripheral participation. Through co-participation in office practice, students engender an ‘understanding of how policy or legislation is framed … where the framing influences come from [and] how an office team goes about
getting those sorts of things done’. As a result, ‘they walk out of here with a greater sense of belief in themselves that they belong or that they will belong in an institution’. In other words, through the exchange, students develop a belief in their potential of full participation in the community of practice.

Yet the level of legitimate peripheral participation varied substantially across the seven degree programs, and tended to relate to organisational guidelines, individual host supervisory style or, significantly, to a student’s existing ‘real world’ experience. The following excerpt from one MPPM host demonstrates quite explicitly the determining criteria regarding levels of peripherality or legitimacy:

We make a judgement call, usually just after we do an interview with them ... We’ll make the call on how loose or tight their reins are. Generally speaking, we give loose reins to those people who have prior real world experience, either in community groups or in another professional life, because we can generally trust or you can generally tell by the way that they talk, where they’re at, because they’ll talk more in terms of interpersonal things, skills and attitude rather than knowledge, so rather than ‘I completed this’ and ‘I did this’, it’s ‘I’ve [been] involved in these things and we did this’, and so we’ll often make a judgement call at that point.

In this case, legitimate peripheral participation of membership was closely bound up with social and relational aptitude. Here the sought-after knowledgeably skilled identity was prior demonstration of ‘situated learning’ in other communities of practice. But for other workplaces, legitimate peripheral participation was more ‘protocol driven’, where ‘old-timers’, or those more adept to the communities’ practices, took the primary role. One BSW student, for example, commented on their ‘observational’ position when dealing with families with disabilities alongside an experienced social worker. Obviously, some practices require initial peripherality, particularly in sensitive areas such as social work. The culture of practice, in this case, necessitates considerable duty of care, compassion and a deep understanding of people with disabilities. In other words, learning is situated within a very specific set of knowledges.

Other students reflected on the kinds of relational questions that were necessary to pose in order to co-participate within that community, as one MPPM student noted:

[When I was there I learnt like the nit and grit of it, like how they negotiate, who’s going where, in what position and who’s speaking on what issue? So a lot of how it works in reality kind of thing which was really interesting, which you can’t learn other than by doing an internship and experiencing it, and just a lot of the things about, you know, you do these abstract theories of democracy or whatever, but then you see it play out in real life.

In the MPPM program there were reflective activities too. This time the educative scenarios involved students exchanging stories of co-participation. One student reflected on this storytelling of shared practices during briefing sessions at the state government parliament. Collaborating among a syndicate group, the students conducted half-hour presentations, followed by group reflection where various difficulties were discussed and collective strategies produced. In the MCMC program, stories were also exchanged between students and workplace employees as part of developing an individual’s transformative potential in the community of practice. In this case, the MCMC host reflected on this aspect of their role in the student placement as employees collectively explained their work, including their personal histories and how they became interested in conservation.
The role and significance of storytelling between ‘newcomers’ and ‘old-timers’ (Lave and Wenger 1991) was perhaps most explicitly captured in one account by a BDS academic, who discussed a particular interaction in terms of gaining a deeper and broader level of practical understanding:

[W]e had this … elderly woman, a senior traditional owner come and she was talking about this amazing stuff about the evacuation of Darwin in the [Second World] War and being held in a segregated Aboriginal camp in Adelaide. Apparently the plan was the government wanted to leave them there and say ‘okay, now you’re integrated into Adelaide’. There were all these Indigenous people from Darwin who the government at the time just wanted to have stay in Adelaide. Anyway, amazing stories.

By drawing on these specific educative scenarios we have aimed to highlight the contextualised nature of ‘situated learning’ across the seven degree programs, and tried to show the various ways in which learning is ‘given structure’ in the student placement/internship/participatory project. But there is another feature of the practice-based learning exchanges that we observed, that of student ‘brokering’ as part of multi-membership in communities of practice. The notion of multidirectional learning through student brokering adds to the particular nuanced view of learning we are presenting in this article.

**Boundary identities and multi-membership: ‘how we learn’ in practice-based learning exchanges**

We now consider students’ ‘multi-membership’ in communities of practice and the subsequent three-way learning exchange that this enables. Our emphasis moves from a specific focus on student learning to one that prioritises the ways in which hosts and academics learn through the practice-based learning exchanges. In this discussion, the situated nature of student learning in the workplace is overlaid with a circulatory ‘reciprocal learning’ flow as students infuse their mobile knowledge – and innovation – into both communities of practice (Wenger 1998). Put differently, learning in the context of the practice-based learning exchanges is both multilayered, through educative scenarios such as ‘absorption’ into the socio-cultural practices of communities, and also multidirectional.

A number of workplace hosts emphasised the reciprocal learning flows that come about through students’ boundary identities. One host accentuated the benefits to the workplace, emphasising the ‘specialist tasks’ that were undertaken, while another referred to the way students ‘refreshed our memories’ on topics that had not been ‘looked at for some time’. Placement students give ‘a fresh view of what you do and how you interact with other activities at the museum which sometimes you know you’re too close to’. Another workplace host emphasised this same student-induced reflection:

I absolutely love it, because what students do – particularly really intelligent, on-the-ball students … what they do is they put you on the spot all the time. They say to you, ‘Why do you do it like that? Why don’t you do it this way? Why is that like that?’ And you have to stop [and think].

A BSW program host similarly mentioned the ways students encouraged a questioning of work practices through their ‘creative output’ in the workplace. These sentiments highlight the innovation that students bring into the workplace through
their legitimate peripheral participation in the university ‘community of practice’. In each case the ‘broker-pair’, or introduction of elements of one community of practice into another, injects into the workplace ‘new interplays of experience and competence’ (Wenger 1998, 254). This sense of innovation, or ‘locus of the production of … new knowledge’ (Wenger 1998, 254), was also picked up by one coordinating academic when elaborating on students’ mobile knowledge:

I think they get this sense of the weightiness of having studied theory, the kind of avoir-dupois that they leave the university with to take to the workplace, because they are quite savvy, some of them do know more, or it’s triggered ideas or debates that they can have in a workplace, that they can then say, ‘no, no, no, there’s something I’ve read … I saw someone else doing this and it’s something we might think of doing’. So, it’s all about triggering ideas that are handy in the workplace.

But it is also the case that the university, the academics in this instance, gain from the students’ mobile knowledge of the workplace and the relationships that are fostered through the overall collaboration. For instance, one MPPM academic referred to how ‘we learn from the community they go to’ via the students’ ‘knowledge transfer’. Another academic from the BA program spoke about a similar resource ‘spin-off’ for the university in the form of a jointly written article by a placement student and program academic.

At a broader level, and also reflecting the multidirectionality of knowledge flows indicative of placements, one MPPM program academic talked about how the internship program had changed the way they taught other courses. For them, incorporating more case studies had been one way that the overall experience of internship had shaped their pedagogical approach. Similarly, but in a more fundamental way, a BDS program academic framed the project placement and other community relationships pedagogically:

I really value it [as a] teacher. I mean, I think it keeps me, it kind of keeps me honest in my teaching because … those relationships or those kinds of experiences are what keep me really focused to make sure that I’m not veering off or just talking, you know, getting lost in the theory.

In a different way, though still in a brokering capacity, an MCMC program academic referred to the ‘overlapping’ of their own knowledge base generated from their experience in the industry prior to their academic post:

[I]n the subject Professional Practices – which is the first subject in the course that I take – I probably link in that more directly to shaping it more to what students’ experience in the internship might be … [this is reflected] in the sort of examples I might give of why it’s relevant … to understand ‘this’.

Through the educative scenarios of student legitimate peripheral participation and multi-membership we have tried to enrich our understanding of the multilayered and multidirectional nature of learning. In the setting of student placements, learning becomes a dynamic, highly relational and reciprocal enterprise. Student engagement and co-participation works simultaneously, in this case, on the boundaries of two communities of practice through legitimate peripheral participation. In the peripheral location of multi-membership, the circulation of specific community practices and knowledge become enmeshed to foster the ever-present potential of new thinking and innovation.
Of course, not all practice-based learning exchanges go smoothly. Some students experienced a number of difficulties and personal challenges as they struggled in their peripherality. Also, the multidirectionality of students’ mobile knowledges had its limits. For instance, as stated above, while ‘brokering’ contains innovative potential, when considering the strongly hierarchical nature of academia, there are only minimal ways in which students could establish new forms of knowledge and practice within these powerful communities of practice. As one BDS program academic noted:

Universities often talk about wanting to work in a more cross-cultural or culturally appropriate way. The student experiences with Indigenous communities has a lot to bring to the uni, like in terms of learning in new ways … they have a lot to offer. But sometimes it all seems to stop with me. I can incorporate it into my classes but it doesn’t necessarily filter up. I mean, the structure of the uni remains unchanged.

This example brings into view some of the issues on power relations identified earlier, yet these limitations do not render Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger’s (1998) overall conceptual framework ineffectual for practice-based learning exchanges.

Transformative and emotional elucidations in practice-based learning exchanges: ‘outside’ experiential and situated learning

Developed through the work of Mezirow (1975, 1978, 1994, 2000), transformative learning emphasises the way an individual’s fundamental frame of reference is transformed, and a higher consciousness, awareness or value is attained when taken-for-granted beliefs are challenged (Mezirow 2000). The catalyst event for Mezirow’s (1978) perspective transformation is a ‘disorienting dilemma’. In such an event, the meaning structure that an individual draws on to shape and circumscribe their ‘guide to action’ – the broad set of psychocultural assumptions that frame an individual’s world-view – is confronted (Mezirow 1994). As a result of this personal confrontation, the individual becomes ‘critically aware of [their] own tacit assumptions and expectations and those of others and assess their relevance for making an interpretation’ (Mezirow 2000, 4; see also Taylor 1997, 2000). According to Dirkx (1997), this aspect of transformative learning involves looking inward – into our souls where our deepest feelings, dreams and longings reside. Implicit in transformative learning is this individualised aspect which involves deeply personal and powerful emotions or beliefs evidenced in action (Mezirow 2000).

These features of transformative learning were particularly apparent in the cross-cultural setting of the BDS program. Partaking in the project-based fieldwork in the Northern Territory, BDS students were exposed to a variety of experiences, including group discussions with Indigenous elders, participation in customary activities including ceremonies, Indigenous-focused flora and fauna walks, and visits to highly significant rock art sites. Reflecting on these transformative properties, the BDS program academic commented on a profound statement made by one BDS host. When describing the benefits for students, the host talked about ‘learning the significance of emotions’ when engaging cross-cultural experiences during the project placement. The host explained his ultimate learning goal was ‘that any visitor that comes to this place learns what it means to feel peace. When they learn that, their lives will be changed forever’. This transformative element came through as another Indigenous BDS host referred to the precise moment of emotional elucidation:
I’ve seen it in some students where they’ve actually sort of … you can see it in their eyes … ‘this is not like I have ever thought’. I know [then] that it’s got through to them.

This fundamental reframing was a sentiment consistently expressed by some students when recounting various educative scenarios. One recalled the ‘personal level’ of transformation, which for them, had been entirely ‘unexpected’. Similarly, another student referred to the way the cross-cultural experiences led to ‘further breaking down [of] my wall of one-sided viewing of the world’.

Other hosts and students, including those from other degree programs, pointed to the power of the learning exchanges to destabilise students’ views of the world. In these cases, the challenging of ‘tacit assumptions’ (Mezirow 2000, 4) also involved an uncomfortable reframing. For example, some hosts elaborated on the need to manage students’ expectations and prepare them for a learning journey that may well be deeper, and more fundamentally challenging, than they anticipate. As one BSW host noted:

For a lot of our students that come, it is literally an awakening. Because they will see sights that they have never seen, or even heard about in their life before. I mean I haven’t come across a student yet that is not challenged by what they see … I always say to them in the interview, that there will not be one ethical value that they have that’s not challenged, probably on a daily basis.

The transformative and emotional elucidations indicative of the educative scenarios identified above are difficult to place within existing concepts of learning, and speak to the need for approaches that encourage an understanding of learning as diffuse, unpredictable and unreplicable. For instance, in situated theorising the changed identity that accompanies acculturation toward full participation in communities of practice is a gradual process. Learning is the result of continuous participatory induction into the community’s contextualised and situated practices over time. In the educative scenarios described above, the disorienting dilemmas, emotional elucidations and subsequent reframing are by nature unpredictable, transient and contingent. These learning characteristics escape the mediated ‘centripetal participation’ illustrated by Lave and Wenger (1991, 100), and the collaborative mutual engagement and shared repertoire highlighted in Wenger (1998; see also Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2004). Indeed, these educative scenarios are more akin (in their contingent learning characteristics) to Nohl’s (2009) explication of transformative learning which emphasises the role of ‘spontaneous action’ to propagate critical self-reflection.

There are also limits to the explanatory potential of experiential learning models in describing these examples of practice-based learning exchanges. While experiential models emphasise an individual’s developmental change, which as we have stated is instrumental to these educative scenarios, the reflection–observation–conception sequence (Kolb 1984; Parilla and Hesser 1998), like situated theories, connotes a relatively structured process and one which occurs over a substantial period of time. There is also, as in the case of Parilla and Hesser’s (1998) experiential study, little said regarding the ‘inward’ reflection in terms of altering belief systems and fundamental reframing.

Conclusions
Practice-based learning exchanges clearly provide a powerful and highly valued learning experience for students. The educative scenarios emphasised throughout this
article help build on our understanding of existing concepts of ‘how we learn’ in several, interlinked ways. Firstly, the students learn in and through place. Situated practices and the production and reproduction of local knowledges lie at the very centre of learning. Through situated practices, students were in a position to reflect on their own positionality and identity. This process was perhaps most clearly seen working in a cross-cultural context, but was also present as students were exposed to diverse institutional and socio-economic worlds as part of their exchange.

Certainly, recognised features of situated and experiential learning were highly pertinent to the experiences of students, hosts and academics in this study. The primacy of ‘storytelling’ and the ‘immersion into the immediacy’ of concrete experience, highlighted by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Kolb (1984) respectively, were central. We found, however, that these constructs are inadequate to encapsulate the full extent of learning in the practice-based learning exchanges. Whereas experiential models operate in a sequential manner (Meredith and Burkle 2008), and ‘situated’ theorising presupposes participatory relations and trajectories, the emotional experiences identified in the educative scenarios involve an individual’s highly personalised and transformative reframing. Here, learning both produces and is produced by shifts in the way a person – the student in this case – understands the world. Significantly, this need not be achieved through others, but can be attained through intimate connections with places such as Indigenous sacred sites.

Practice-based learning was a way that all players were exposed to multiple communities of practice, facilitating circulatory reciprocal learning. The students, in particular, in moving between different communities, brokered various levels of exchange, introducing elements of one community of practice into the other, enhancing both. Academics, students and hosts all gained from, and contributed to, the students’ mobile knowledges. We have also identified that not all practice-based learning exchanges go according to plan, and that there are limits to the extent to which brokering can actually transform extant community knowledge and practice.

An attention to learning as a three-way exchange means taking all players seriously, including the university. The ‘ivory tower’ myth – underpinned by the idea that ‘academic’ (formal) learning and ‘workplace’ (or informal) learning are somehow discrete entities – persists in the workplace, within academia and within the literature. Interestingly, while Lave and Wenger (1991) provide the primary conceptual tools to better understand workplace relations and learning, their ultimate position on the role of academic learning is damning. Their representation of formal education as largely cognitive, propositional and highly abstracted is almost matched by Beckett and Hagar’s (2000) relentless distinctions between the formal learning paradigm and lifelong learning. While the latter ultimately propose a ‘contiguous’ model, mixing ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ learning (Beckett and Hagar 2002), the extent of their critique of universities’ ‘historically-hallowed elitism’ (2002, 4) leaves the ‘formal’ academic sphere largely depleted of its learning capacity.

Similar sentiments were scattered throughout the empirical findings. But these views reduce the nuanced and multifarious learning endeavours that pertain to contemporary university education. Indeed, the discussion in this article highlights the importance of the university in facilitating and structuring exchanges, building relationships and, crucially, contributing an important educative element to co-participation. If students’ boundary identities facilitate learning for hosts, universities and the students themselves, the university, as one of the key communities of practice involved in the exchange, has an important role to play. As one host succinctly states,
‘it’s not just getting education from the university and the experience from the workplace, it’s not that clear cut’ (MPPM host).

Given the multifarious and eclectic modes of learning indicative of the practice-based learning exchanges, any attempt at proposing a practical guide to action might prove conceptually haphazard or presumptuous (especially in the case of transformative learning). Despite this, drawing out some of the pedagogic implications is a timely exercise, particularly as the broader thrust of the research is to advocate the many benefits of these practice-based learning exchanges. Certainly, in terms of preparing for learning exchanges, academics could be trained to become theoretically savvy in experience-led schemas: for example, experiential, situated and transformative models. These concepts could then be introduced into coursework programs to better prepare students to be self-aware and perhaps pre-empt the learning potential, say of legitimate peripheral participation, when partaking in workplace activities. What these kinds of preparations would aim to do is raise awareness of the different knowledge types and modes of learning that these exchanges present.

Formal ‘academic’ learning can no longer be characterised as a generic exercise in intentional instruction, or viewed as an individualised process ‘where knowledge must be demonstrated out of context’ (Wenger 1998, emphasis added). Nor can it be described as void of contingency, practical application or process orientation (Beckett and Hagar 2000). As the educative scenarios outlined in this article reveal, ‘how we learn’ in the coursework-mediated practice-based learning exchanges shows the highly diffuse learning experiences attained through university education. The extent to which universities are courting public, community and industry sectors, and the multifarious and eclectic learning modes that these partnerships engender, attest to the redundant notion of the ‘ivory tower’. Learning – whether emanating from the university or the workplace – entails a myriad of characteristics, processes and functions that defy categorisation. In this sense, we agree with Sfard’s (1998, 4) conclusions that an over-reliance on one learning metaphor, whether acquisitional (university) or participational (workplace), leads to ‘theoretical distortions and … undesirable practices’.

Acknowledgements
The authors would like to thank all those university staff members, students, alumni and workplace hosts who participated in the research project, and who gave their valuable time to respond to our questions. Support for this project has been provided by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Ltd. Finally, we extend our thanks to the three anonymous referees for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

References


