

Rethinking situated learning

The research

This research explores how UK firefighters learn within communities of practice. Through ethnographic studies within the Northern Fire and Rescue Service (NFRS), the research looks at the role novices play within communities of practice and demonstrates how learning within these communities is multi-directional.



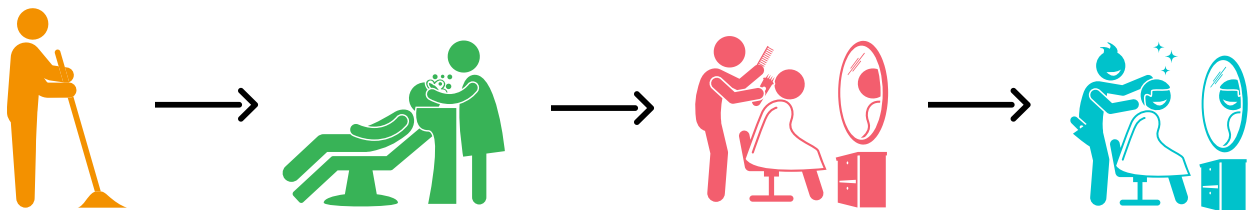
The data was collected in two phases:

- Phase 1: Within the NFRS when there was an absence of novices (due to austerity and a reduction in recruitment.)
- Phase 2: Two years later, within the NFRS with novices in the community.

What are communities of practice?

The term "communities of practice" was coined by two anthropologists, Lave and Wenger, back in 1991. Lave and Wenger looked at small groups of skilled workers to investigate how people learned from each other while doing tasks.

When new people (novices) joined the groups, they would start with very basic tasks. As time went by, the novices became more skilled themselves, gradually taking on more complex tasks until they learned the skills in full.



In all of these communities of practice, knowledge was situated. i.e. it was placed into a context, and to understand it, the novices and experienced workers had to be very familiar with what that context was.

The importance of novices



1. The novices ask the experienced firefighters questions, causing the more senior firefighters to reflect on what they do, and sharpen their skills/knowledge.

2. They encourage the experienced firefighters to tell stories, jogging the collective memory.



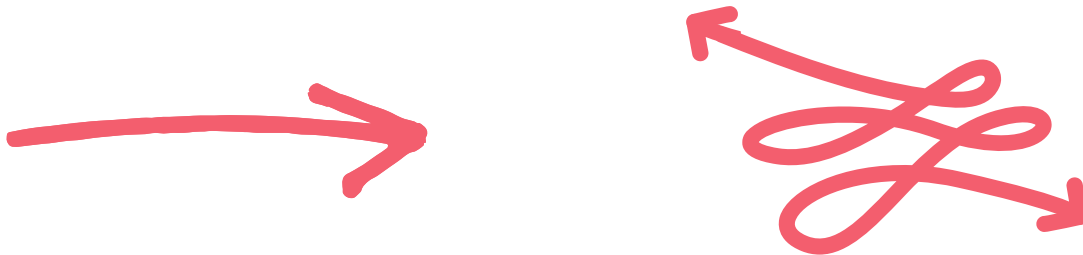
3. Novices bring textbook knowledge with the most up-to-date procedures.

4. The novice might not be at the start of their working lives. If they move to firefighting from another career they may bring a different but useful set of skills and experiences.



Implications for the workplace

The findings show that learning within communities of practice is not linear; it is actually a much messier, multi-directional process. Novices learnt from more experienced workers and workers also learnt from novices.



During times of austerity, there are often recruitment freezes (which are often portrayed as credible alternatives to redundancy or downsizing) but this research shows that depriving organisations of novices has an impact on employees retaining and developing their skills.

How can I find out more?

Listen to our podcast episode: "Rethinking situated learning". (Search for Leeds University Business School Research and Innovation Podcast.)



Read the paper: ["Rethinking Situated Learning: Participation and Communities of Practice in the UK Fire and Rescue Service", Work, Employment and Society 2020, Vol. 34\(6\) 1045–1061](https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017020913225)
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