

Events and professional learning: studying educational practitioners

Structured abstract

Purpose

This study trialled data collection and analytical methods to address the dearth of research into the use of attending off-site events for professional learning.

Methodological approach

Three events, for academics and school leaders, were studied. A range of methods were trialled during 2006- 7, with the aim of collecting real-time data. These included shadowing individual delegates, interviews of other delegates, still and moving imagery and survey questionnaire.

Findings

Collecting evidence of professional activities in real-time requires sensitivity to minimise its impact on the activities. It is ideal if everyone at such events can be informed fully in advance of data collection.

Any assistance, including participating in the research, in reflecting on the benefits of attending an event was appreciated. The most important benefit of attending events was in networking rather than the formal purpose of the event itself. It was found that such interactions are likely to affect the delegates' sense of identity. Individuals also reported that their strategies for using knowledge from events are incompletely developed.

Practical implications

This study raises issues of how best to support learning at events and the use of knowledge and understanding back in the workplace. Raising awareness of the importance of networking at an event to participants could influence how both organisers plan for, and delegates use, such events.

Originality

This work was exploratory both in methodological and conceptual development and highlighted key issues and possible avenues for conceptualising the learning from events. Few studies have been carried out on such events.

Keywords: workplace learning, networking, professional development, knowledge creation, participation, professional identity

Classification: Research paper

Events and professional learning: studying educational practitioners

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1.0 Professional learning from events: a need for research

There is a long history of research on continuing professional development [CPD] in education, particularly with respect to school teachers. In the last decade studies have been pessimistic about linking CPD activity to impact on pupil learning (Lawless and Pellegrino, 2007, Wilson and Berne, 1999). Reviews in England have been more optimistic (Bolan and Weindling, 2006, EPPI-Centre, 2005, Day et al., 2006b) and, although there are few studies showing an impact on pupil learning, there are more that show improvements in teacher practice and school improvement. Much of the research shows that effective CPD requires clear needs identification, and should include collaboration, mentoring and coaching, reflection and the sharing of knowledge within schools. Within all this work, events such as conferences rarely feature, with only one specific study of conferences (with a focus on ICT), whose authors acknowledge that:

Professional conferences, both academic and nonacademic, are an under-researched domain. Given their importance and frequency in the life of those who attend, it is remarkable that they have been the focus of so little study (Jacobs and McFarlane, 2005), p. 317).

We note some research in areas other than education: within healthcare (Festner, 2006), with respect to farm managers (Kilpatrick, 1998) and with respect to e-learning within a commercial context (Park and Wentling, 2007). More usually evaluations of specific events are conducted by organisers, focussing on the formal sessions and presentations (Goodall et al., 2005) although the systematic evaluation of the impact of CPD is now being advocated to schools in the UK by the Training and Development Agency (TDA, 2007a, TDA, 2007b). These evaluations offer possibilities for, but explicitly ignore, the 'informal' dimension; something well recognised in understandings of workplace learning. A recent systematic research review of the impact of networks for the National College for School Leadership [NCSL] indicated that interpersonal contacts (as opposed to print or electronic communications) were the principal means of transferring knowledge, and many of these contacts were integral aspects of CPD activities; events being cited (Bell *et al.*, 2006), p. 17).

What prior research there has been in this area uses retrospective interviews or survey questionnaire eg. (Biesta et al., 2004). In this Teaching and Learning Research Programme's [TLRP] *Learning Lives* project Biesta and his colleagues recognise that they had to make compromises on their desire to capture 'real-time' data and methods which allow the professionals a voice in recognising and exploring their own learning.

The lack of research meant that when we began planning this study (carried out between November 2006 and April 2007) we needed to explore both the

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conceptualisation of the processes and the research methodology. Although we were aware of challenging methodological issues, our interest was stimulated by findings from earlier research into networking e.g. (McCormick et al., 2007).

This paper summarises the pilot work on a methodological framework for both data collection and analysis, incorporating real-time methods of data capture, to understand CPD associated with schools and other organisations.¹ The reactions to, and the utility of, the methods used are presented. We outline the analytical approaches explored, and propose an analytic framework to integrate the themes raised by the research, and illustrate it using some of the evidence collected. Drawing on all the empirical evidence collected, we offer tentative guidance to those organising and participating in such CPD events.

2.0 Possible conceptual avenues towards understanding learning at events

We conceptualise an event in terms of learning in which the situated nature of learning is acknowledged. This requires the site of learning to be considered alongside the nature and goals of that learning (Putnam and Borko, 2000). We therefore consider personal agendas on the one hand and are informed by those foregrounding the importance of the socio-spatial dimension to professional activities on the other e.g. (Massey, 1994, Massey, 2005, McGregor, 2004). These we bring together in a consideration of the impact of learning on identity and enactment of role. This paper outlines some of the conceptualisations of events that could be considered in reflecting on the nature of the whole experience, including activity prior and subsequent to the event, in addition to that of the event itself.

2.1 Learning through participation

The workplace learning literature is dominated by the participation metaphor (Sfard, 1998), especially in the UK e.g. (Day, 2003, Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2002, Hodkinson et al., 2006, Lee et al., 2004, Fuller et al., 2005), with ‘communities of practice’ being a central concept (Wenger, 1998). This, in terms of (Rogoff, 1995)’s planes of analysis, deals with the community level. We addressed the interactional level of the event and the delegate’s ‘return’ to a community of practice² after the event through Wenger’s notion of individual ‘learning trajectories’ as this considers both interactional and intra-personal levels.

The study of conferences in education cited earlier (Jacobs and McFarlane, 2005), considers them as a community of practice for knowledge building (albeit that they were investigating the role of technology). As we will show, even if participants at a conference are from a single community of practice, their identity development and hence agendas can be quite different. As Wenger (1998, p. 149) says ‘we define who we are by where we have been and where we are going.’ In addition the participation metaphor implies *strong* links among those who are participating, while network theory literature recognises that weak links, such as new, transient or emerging relationships, are just as significant to professionals’ knowledge creation (Fox et al., 2006). Events offer many possibilities for such links and therefore potential new benefits for a delegate and their workplace (Granovetter, 1973). Where teachers use weak *and* strong links, we hypothesise that the participation metaphor is inadequate in fully explaining knowledge creation and sharing. Some authors now see the latter as a distinct metaphor of learning (Paavola et al., 2004) and it was this we developed in the

light of theories of networks and networking as a way to understand learning at and through events.

2.2 Networks and networking

A number of strands to the interpersonal dimension to attending and benefiting from CPD can be seen in terms of networks and the activity of networking (McCormick et al., 2007, McCormick et al., 2006):

- Collaborative networks – where the focus is on teachers working across schools, often characterised as professional learning communities (Veugelers and O’Hair, 2005, Lieberman and Grolnick, 1996, Lieberman, 2000). This approach underlies the National College for School Leadership’s (NCSL) Networked Learning Communities and reflects the participation metaphor. Collaboration implies strong links among teachers and those they work with, whereas at events the links may be weak or strong. Weak links might include casual contact or conversation with someone or indeed a web site visited to collect materials or read information.
- Personal aspects of networking – where the focus is on individual characteristics, seeing people as for example ‘connectors’ and ‘mavens’ (Gladwell, 2002), but in which the location or event is given little attention. This network approach does recognise the variation of strength of links (Barabási, 2003, Gladwell, 2002). In the TLRP *Learning how to learn – in classrooms, in schools and in networks* (LHTL) project, a categorisation of strength and value of links was developed with respect to personal networking in educational contexts (Fox et al., 2006). This can be considered to marry with the domination of ‘*the personal driver*’ in reasons for teacher’s undertaking CPD (Grundy and Robinson, 2004), p146 when considering events.
- Business networking – draws attention to networking at events largely from ‘popular’ texts aimed at those who want to be successful in business. *Masters of Networking* (Misner and Morgan, 2000) includes sections on ‘attending the network event’ (pp. 97-100), and on how to be an effective participant at a convention (pp. 117-118). This contains advice on purposes, goals, plans, attendance, evaluation and follow-up and also talks about ‘each network event as a journey’ (p. 98). None of this advice cites any research but business networking is very active in the USA and UK (e.g. Business Network International [www.bni.com] and Women’s Business Network [www.wbn.org.uk]). Kilpatrick (1998) recognises the importance of events in small business managers’ learning ‘networks’, although her survey approach to examining farmers’ networks does not investigate any details of the processes involved. Festner (2006) is one of the few authors within a research context arguing that individuals need to be consciously aware of knowledge created at such events/activities and be making conscious decisions to ‘transfer’ this practically into their workplace.
- Social networks – developed from sociological roots such as sociograms into recent more quantitative work on social network analysis of organisations (Wellman et al., 1988³). SNA has been used to examine how organisations create and share new knowledge in innovative technology companies (Hakkarainen et al., 2004) and an ego-centred variant of this approach was

explored in the study of educational networks in the LHTL project (McCormick et al., 2007, Carmichael et al., 2006, McCormick et al., 2006). By viewing networks from an individual's point of view rather than as a complete network, individual and social perspectives are combined.⁴

2.3 Interactions in space and time

The situated view of (Putnam and Borko, 2000) implies that events take place in time and space. Applying these lenses draws on further areas of literature, in particular geographical and sociological research, some of which have been applied to schools e.g. (Fisher, 2004, Massey, 1994, Massey, 2005, McGregor, 2004). While photocopiers are often the hub of a school, and water coolers an important focus for knowledge exchange in many workplaces, around the coffee bar, the lobby and side areas at events might be scenes of meaningful inter-personal interactions (Misner and Morgan, 2000, Fox, 2006). Spatially, ideas of why one location is used rather than another, the interaction between social processes and spaces (Massey and Allen, 1984), and the conceptualisation of locations chosen for informal interactions (McGregor, 2003, McGregor, 2004), offer useful lines of inquiry. In particular, Massey's (1994) 'articulated moments' (i.e. times and sites where unique and ephemeral interactions take place) can be explored for their utility in exposing informal learning activities associated with formal events. Tuan's analogy of people networking as part of being on a journey to future goals having set off from a stable 'home' (Tuan, 1977) also links with Wenger's (1998) notion of learning trajectories.

2.4 Identity

While Wenger places greatest emphasis on engagement in practice as characterising identity, others base identity on the narratives told by oneself and by others about ourselves (Sfard and Prusak, 2005, Biesta et al., 2004). In Wenger's terms these narratives are reifications. These views have methodological implications of trying to capture changes in real-time. Methods both that capture engagement and story-telling were considered.

The notion of individual trajectories allows us to consider how these might be expected to intersect one with another as people meet and interact at an event. They allow us a way of looking at both the individual experience of events in time and space combined with the development of identity. Identity may also be considered from a social psychological perspective to be affected by interactions relating to what have been termed 'spheres of influence' rather than personal networks. The impact of these interactions on role identity can be viewed in terms of confirmation and challenge to current perceptions of role (Stryker and Burke, 2000). Such tensions to identity have been recently explored with respect to teachers' lives in a recent UK longitudinal study which also views perceptions of formal task and role as components of professional identity (Day et al., 2006a).

2.5 The emerging model

To support both project design and data analysis we drew together ideas from the above literature and concluded that an event could be considered to have a 'life' of its own. This 'life within an event' (Figure 1) relates to:

- a. changes in the knowledge and understanding of participants;
- b. the personal networks of participants;

- c. identity (views of themselves as negotiated with others);
- d. the role of participants (i.e. whether the individual is a teacher, a school leader, a researcher or a senior academic and on what basis they interacted with others at the event).

An event can therefore be considered in its entirety as a location and a process in which all delegates have the potential and opportunity to undergo changes. This framework allows for a consideration of the learning of individuals as individual yet also social. A networking perspective allows both the nature of social links and the individual's networking characteristics to be incorporated.

When considering any one individual as the focus for analysis we hypothesised that the individual's experience of such an event could be seen as one short-term trajectory nested within another as a longer-term concept, hence the notion of an 'event within lives' (Figure 1). These individuals, interacting one with another, therefore had the potential for their trajectories to intersect through fleeting (articulated moments; Massey, 1994) or more extended interactions.

<Figure 1 about here>

Learning trajectories are therefore conceptualised as journeys within which mini-journeys are undertaken during the course of the event itself. Individual journeys, as implied by Putnam & Borko (2000), are also affected by agendas and plans prior to the event and the benefits or observable outcomes investigated as they relate to or affect longer-term agendas. We therefore swathe need to extend the study into the workplace prior and subsequent to the event. These journeys may be in any or all four identified strands: developing knowledge and understanding of participants; changes in the personal networks of participants; developing identity which may act on perceptions of role identity with respect to how one thinks of oneself and how others think of you. These journeys will all be affected by spatial and temporal factors embedded in the event as both a location and a process.

3.0 The studies

Events were chosen as typical of those attended off-site by educational professionals ie. academic and practitioner conferences and a practitioner workshop. In each case the foci were non-subject specific. School or Faculty based training or development activities were excluded as substantially different socio-spatial considerations could be expected. Access to specific events was negotiated with the sponsoring bodies.

Research participants shadowed for pilot one were known to the researchers to enable open feedback to be offered on that particular method. Other than this and including those interviewed in pilot one all participants were volunteers contacted 'cold'.

Three pilots were carried out at three different events, with different kinds of participants, and methodologically different foci. The first pilot, supported by the TLRP, was a higher education academic conference over three days in a hotel venue. Delegates were presenters, or part of a team presenting papers, in small workshops. They also attended plenary presentations in a large auditorium. At this event four methods of data collection were trialled (Table 1). The second event was a one-day seminar on improving effectiveness as a school leader led by two academics and supported by other invited presenters, on behalf of the NCSL. The majority of the event was held in one room at a hotel venue and was based around a set of materials.

Volunteers were approached to participate in the trialling of five methods (Table 1). The third pilot, also a NCSL event, was a one-day conference with a mixture of plenary presentations in a main auditorium and workshop sessions in breakout rooms. Delegates were school leaders completing or interested in undertaking practitioner research sponsored by the NCSL and many of these were presenting at sessions. This was held at the NCSL's purpose-built headquarters. In particular at this event methods were chosen to capture how participants, presenters and event organisers used the spaces available and how spaces were perceived (Table 1).

Table 1: A summary of data collected by method and by event

Event	Methods	Number of data sources
Academic conference (pilot one)	Delegate and participant ^a interviews	7 20-40 minute recorded interviews
	Participant (shadowed)- notes on activities and interactions	2 participants, full day shadow
	Video of one space	2.5 hours in total
	Still images	58 images
	Questionnaire returns	9 researcher and 29 organiser's questionnaires returned
School leader workshop (pilot two)	Delegate, participant and presenter interviews	2 interviews with presenters pre-event by email With each participant: 1 interview pre-event (telephone), 1 during event (recorded) and 2 post-event interviews (1 on school visit one month later and 1 by telephone call 3 months later)
	Participant (shadowed) –notes on activities and interactions	2 participants, half-day shadow
	Still images ^b	18 images
	Questionnaire returns	4 researcher questionnaires returned
School leader conference (pilot three)	Interviews with delegates and presenters	1 with organiser pre-event by email 4 during event with 5 participants
	Still images	49 images
	Video (no control over what was recorded)	Negotiated access to recording (by commercial company)

a In this paper the term 'delegate' (or event delegate) will be used to refer to individuals participating in an event and 'participant' (or research participant) when the reference relates to their participation in our research.

b All images were collected by the researcher after asking for permission to take it. It had been planned that participants would collect their own evidence of benefits and outcomes post conference. Although the participants said they would be happy to do so, they decided they could not adequately capture the perceived benefits as images as they related to ideas or people. Ethical procedures, trialled elsewhere (Pegg and Fox, 2007, Fox, 2008) were in place.

4.0 Reflections on methods

The methods and their associated ethical procedures were first trialled in pilot one. These indicated that video-recording of spaces would need most careful clearance at any event. Below we consider each of the methods.

4.1 Still and video images data capture

While video offers opportunities to capture groups interacting (Heath and Hindmarsh, 2002), it is an invasive tool. Video recording did not fit well with developing

researcher-participant relationships necessary for some of the other methods; it served to exclude the researcher from the proceedings. Leaving the tripod unattended may have minimised the disruption we noted, as (Barbash and Taylor, 1997) indicate, but recording affected the use of spaces. For example, the hotel staff in pilot one reported that they felt the biscuits had been left at coffee time because of the siting of the video camera nearby, and several people caught on camera in lobbies during sessions explained that they felt their 'non-attendance' was being recorded and may be used against them. When asked about their event being video recorded, participants in pilot two said:

I'm just wondering if people would act to the camera. It depends on the sort [of video] of course, because if it's going to be used for teaching purposes, say as snippets of video of people's interactions and you've got people involved in a particular level of discussion, people might feel quite vulnerable. (Participant shadow, headteacher, pilot two)

I think, because of what happened [receiving important calls about the school], I would probably [have been] little bit more awkward about it all, but ordinarily in a normal day on a course, I'd be very happy for it [to be video recorded]. (Participant shadow, deputy headteacher, pilot two)

The organisers made similar points.

Video recording was not used again by the researcher and recording for the third pilot was taken from that made by the crew contracted by the event organisers. This filming was helping to publicise the research by the delegates and many were actually keen to engage with it. The importance of achieving empowerment is highlighted in visual ethnographic work (Pink, 2001). Video recording was not considered a successful research tool for this evaluatory type of research.

In contrast, all delegates who were asked were happy to have still images taken of them. A number of images relating to observed interactions were successfully collected at each pilot (Table 1).

4.2 Shadowing/related interviews

While it was difficult to find volunteers to come forward to be shadowed when contacted 'cold' and, despite the final number in this pilot study being small, this method is considered a powerful tool. In addition, all four participant delegates said they benefited enormously and would recommend being shadowed to others if future opportunities arose. When asked why they had volunteered, two participants cited personal dispositions such as wanting to be helpful and an openness both towards research and the potential personal benefits to be gained by including oneself in research.

I've always been interested in research, when I was doing my B. Ed, I actually did my big assignment or thesis on the impact of educational research. (Participant shadow, headteacher, pilot two)

I like engaging ... I'd probably enjoy it. ... I thought it will probably put a different dimension on things, so ... I might get something out of it ... And that's the other thing I saw it and thought 'I could do that, I can help.' ... I wanted to help. (Participant shadow, deputy headteacher, pilot two)

Rather than researchers acting as an inert shadow, there was interaction between researcher and participant. In each case the latter wanted to use the researcher as a means of reflection regardless of whether the participant was known to the researcher or not (comparing the first quote below with the second and third).

It hasn't felt like a shadow it's felt more like a co-conspirator or buddy or something like that over the course of the day, which has been rather nice. I think a lot of it is to do with the fact that

I've known you [the shadow] and ... so there's a comfortable feeling about it. You could have had somebody else who was irritating. The process depends very much on the person and on the relationship. (Shadowed senior academic, pilot one)

Well, having been through the process thus far I can definitely say that it's a very valuable reflective tool, and I appreciate that you've got your own purpose here but it's really helped me to crystallise and to do something which I wouldn't normally do, which is talk more in depth about an event that's happened. I don't make enough time. (Participant shadow, deputy headteacher, pilot two)

No [being shadowed] didn't detract at all from the course, as I say it helped to consolidate my thinking about it. From that point of view I thought it was quite useful. (Participant shadow, headteacher, pilot two)

The benefits to participants of shadowing increased when tracking them back into school.

I haven't really discussed [the event] - only with you. It's quite nice to have the opportunity to talk to somebody after the course about it, because what you do is consolidate the thoughts about the day and I think that this is also a problem with a lot of courses, that you don't always have a chance to revisit and review them. (Participant shadow, headteacher, pilot two, one month after event)

That there were benefits appeared the same whether the participant was known or not to the researcher before the study.

4.3 Additional interviews

A small number of short semi-structured interviews with a 'random' selection of delegates were negotiated during pilots one and three (Table 1). People were approached when seemingly convenient and an interview about their purposes, strategies and experiences at events requested soon after some exploratory dialogue with the researcher. No-one approached refused to be interviewed or to be recorded. These interviews provided other perspectives on the event to inform an understanding of the life within the event. They were used to inform the understanding of the event itself rather than the place of the event in their individual lives. Such interviews could not be carried out by a single researcher in conjunction with shadowing because of the intensity of this latter task.

It had been hoped that structured interviews could have been conducted pre-event with presenters, organisers and delegates at pilots one and two. Due mainly to the unease of event organisers, access to the negotiation of such interviews was limited (Table 1). These interviews were carried out by email or telephone.

4.4 Questionnaire returns

Questionnaire response rates too were very low. Of the 204 expected delegates at the academic conference (pilot one), 9 questionnaires relating to this research were returned (4%), and 29 (15%) completed the organiser's evaluation questionnaires. In pilot two, of the expected 60 delegates, 4 questionnaires were received by post (7%). No access to the organiser's questionnaires was possible in the case of pilots two or three (Table 1). Questionnaires are a common evaluation tool used by organisers for accountability and informing the design of further events. Our questionnaire was in addition to these and, despite also being available by email and hard copy, there was both confusion and apathy to complete what looked like parallel returns. Although questionnaires are not recommended for future such studies, the limited data gathered was included to enrich the data set used in the analyses.

5.0 Analysis: two possible approaches

The academic and school leader events were considered as two separate data sets to allow opportunity to feedback separately to the sponsoring organisations. Two analytical exercises were undertaken for each data set utilising dimensions of the model (Figure 1). The first explored a framework for coding data on '*the life within an event*'. This included pre, during and post-event data. The second considered data collected from, and about, a small sample of shadowed individuals (participants) in terms of their trajectories through the events ie. '*the event within their lives*'.

5.1 A holistic view of events

The first approach involved entering all interview and questionnaire data into a qualitative software package (*Atlas.ti*) and then applying multi-layered coding to focus on particular aspects of the data. A three stage process was explored (outlined in Figure 2):

- First level - Gross chunking (descriptive analysis).
- Second level - Sectioning based on 4 strands of the conceptual model (analytic categorisation).
- Third level - Sub-coding with both theoretically generated codes specific to strands at level 2, and generic codes applicable across all second level categories.

Figure 2 shows how the three levels inter-relate.

<Figure 2 about here>

We present our findings summarised according to the analytic (level 2) categories. Figure 3 summarises the proportion of coded data for each of these categories (knowledge and understanding, personal networks and networking, identity and role) for the two data sets. We go on to illustrate some of the analysis for each strand.

<Figure 3 about here>

5.1.1 Knowledge and understanding

This category was twice as prevalent in the school leader than the academic data set. This can be explained as much by the differing aims and styles of events as by the individual aims and characteristics of those attending. This is at first counter-intuitive, given that academics' work is predicated on developing knowledge and understanding and school leaders' with practice. Academics were using the event to further networking agendas and their identity and perceived role. It was the school leaders who had often chosen to attend the events to gather information or evidence and for whom the networking was a secondary outcome. As we noted earlier, informal aspects of professional learning are important e.g. (Livingstone, 1998, Tarc et al., 2006) and informal dialogue was a significant part of the interactions experienced by participants. Participants expressed either what became termed 'lightbulb moments' or explained benefits to them in terms of developing their knowledge and understanding.

When asked about their learning from the event, participants often made reference to the strategies they used to transfer knowledge, often associated with their use of materials (Level 3, generic; Figure 2). These strategies were discussed and revealed dissatisfaction with their methods, raising fundamental issues about the reification of

new knowledge and understanding, particularly in relation to the impact of an event on the workplace. New understandings need to be articulated and made conscious e.g. (Festner, 2006) and this was something participants attempted to do across both data sets. Dialogue, as indicated earlier, aided such reifications.

5.1.2 Personal networks and networking

This was by far the most prevalent code at level 2 for both data sets (Figure 3): 38% of the organiser's evaluation questionnaire returns (only a small number) listed networking either with colleagues informally, or a chance to interact with presenters formally, as the most worthwhile activity in attending the academic conference. This category was analysed further at level 3 using a framework to characterise interactions (Table 2).

Table 2: An interactional analytical framework: One specific theoretical categorisation (level 3)

Code categories	Sub-codes.
Intentionality of contacts made	Planned in advance (intentional) by delegate
	Expected as part of the formal proceedings/expected attendance
	Unexpected (serendipitous)
Relationships with the contacts	New (never met before) and possibly transient (unlikely to meet again)
	Transient (limited to that on the day but someone may refer back to at a later date)
	Emergent (a developing relationship)
	Intermittent (have met before but only incidentally through moving in similar circles)
	Ongoing (a strong continuing relationship with colleague or collaborator)
Purposes for the interaction	Own agenda
	Agenda of others' (including formal agendas of presenters)
	Exploratory ('small-talk' finding out about one another)
	Supportive (comments that show a commitment to the feelings of the other)
	Confirmatory (comments which ask for reassurance about issues)
	Feedback (asking for critical reactions)
	Incidental (practical and social reasons for interacting)
Content of the dialogue	Personal (and social) for example about background, home life, faith, family
	Informal but professional
	Formal i.e. related to the intentions of the event
Own Status	Lead academic/practitioner – acting in this role specifically
	Less senior academic/practitioner – with regard to other in interaction
	Peer – acting in role would expect of any other delegate in room
Role of other	Collaborator
	Presenter
	Critical friend – formal role

A summary of this analysis is presented below.

The value of making a *range of contacts* was articulated clearly by two headteachers who had come as part of a collaborative, yet geographically dispersed, group.

HT1: There are colleagues who we have previously met and previously worked with, and those that we haven't because you have developed a network of people with whom you can establish contact today and keep that contact going, and also other delegates that we haven't come across before who happen to be in the same session and asked a question that was reasonably interesting to follow up afterwards...

HT2: And I think that's why it's really useful to have a delegate list so you can see where people are from and what their perspectives are. (Two headteachers, pilot three)

There were contrasting views expressed across the pilots about preferences of coming alone or with colleagues. Having a 'buddy', to compare notes and reflect with, was balanced against not making so many new connections with others. Personal attitudes were also highlighted; being proactive was considered beneficial as expressed in this quote.

[My old supervisor] would always say you must wear your badge in a physical position and she'd say you'd badge scan and you say you're so and so from so and so and I've read your work on.... I know [name of new contact made] was doing quite a bit of that as she is two or three weeks after [completing her Doctoral viva]. (Senior academic delegate, pilot one)

There is also the possibility of networking on behalf of someone else not there in person and brokering⁵ for them a new contact that might prove fruitful for them

I have been networking on behalf of [my partner]...Now what I'll do is check it out with [my partner] first and then email to [the delegate] to see if it's OK...If I see [the delegate again] I might ask her or I might send her a card with [my partner]'s address on the back of it. (Senior academic delegate, pilot one)

The longer-term significance of these interactions was difficult to capture, and categorising relationships in terms of 'transient', 'emergent', 'intermittent' or 'ongoing' in nature (see Table 2), necessitated high inference. Even with participant verification, classification was still felt to be insecure without the benefit of hindsight, possible only with longer-term shadowed participants.

5.1.3 Identity

In our model (Figure 1), identity is a central part of a learning trajectory (Wenger, 1998) that is not static and fixed. This is therefore distinct from 'role' as a concept that relates to perceptions of a formal position and views of others of that role, though of course changes in role (and even aspirations to change) will have implications for identity. Identity was represented equally in the two data sets. Changes in identity, because of attending an event, can occur both during the event or in the longer-term. These were explored by looking at co-occurrences between identity and pre-event, event or post-event (level 1) data.

In the academic conference even senior academic delegates referred to developing identity as exemplified in the following extract from an interview.

There are some people [I see in the conference] who one still holds a torch for because of their being trail-blazers and you're in their wake so yes, I'm 52, but I still feel daunted. ... I came in a novice. OK I'm an experienced ethnographer but I have felt quite a bit of respect because I'm actually in class [classroom]. I'm not just recording interviews and reading journals, I'm in there watching, being there and seeing. ... and people have chased [me] to find things out which has been ace. (Delegate, pilot one)

Thus the reaction of others (their narrative of her) is contributing to her own developing sense of identity. Such reactions confers with Stryker and Burke's (2000) notions that others can challenge or confirm identity which in this case related to her role as an established senior academic but also her sense of self-esteem (Day et al, 2006a).

5.1.4 Role

Although this category was rare in the school leader data (Figure 3), the role of the delegate could influence the experience of an event, as this deputy head noted:

The speakers really didn't do it for me ... I didn't relate to their experiences and this was funny because [my headteacher] particularly liked the first one, because he related to that. It was about the first day in as the new head teacher and I haven't done that. (Participant shadow, Deputy headteacher, pilot two)

He went on to say that, whilst the event was still relevant, he could not bring direct experience to some aspects of what was covered. In this particular case development of his identity, as it related to role, was one of the impacts of attending the event; he started to see himself as an aspiring headteacher (as explored further in the next section).

Questions can now be posed 'Under what circumstances and with what impact were delegates interacting as peers rather than in hierarchical roles?', 'Do such questions reflect the purposes of the particular interaction or more general agendas for the event?', or 'Do they reflect particular behaviours and dispositions exhibited by delegates?'. The senior academic ethnographer (quoted above) was particularly active in making less senior delegates feel included and considered as equals. This may reflect her humility in contrast to her perceived status and her genuine openness to new relationship building. This she was able to articulate as a conscious belief as to how to act as a role model for conference behaviour.

5.2 Using 'shadow' and event data to get an individual perspective

Data were also analysed in terms of an individual's trajectory through an event. Using the model (Figure 1) these journeys included: pre-determined agendas being acted out at the event, new agendas being born, and following the individuals back into the workplace to consider impact. These were analysed in terms of the same four strands as above.

There were significant differences between the data from the academic and school leaders' events attributable to:

- the different styles of events i.e. the structure, content and rationale experienced by the delegates;
- individual factors such as different purposes, both personal and work-related (which could be revealed through analysing data relating to their identity and role);
- different strategies and preferences exhibited whilst attending the event.

Below we summarise what was a detailed analysis of each interaction (using Table 2) of a senior academic shadowed at pilot one and a headteacher at pilot two.

The majority of the shadowed academic's interactions concerned their own agenda. The school leader on the other hand had no opportunities for planned contacts to be made as no delegate list was circulated pre-event. They also met no-one at the event they had previous relationships with. The balance of this school leader's purposes for each interaction were either exploratory (i.e. what might be gained from such an interaction) or related to the other person's agenda (often the presenters). The school leader had 10% more formal interactions and the academic 10% more informal interactions. Given that the school leader experienced a very structured day, a significant proportion of interactions were however not directly associated with the proceedings of the event. The delegates at the school leader event were headteachers, deputy headteachers and a few advisers or consultants. The roles of the academic's contacts were more varied, many of whom had agendas other than those of the event

and who related to previous relationships. It appeared that the school leader related to others mainly as a peer or equal whereas the academic acted hierarchically as 'lead academic'.

Still images to accompany the majority of these interactions provided contextual information, enabling an appreciation of the impact of the mutual interaction of process and place. Images were used to structure 'Day in the life of ...' summaries discussed after the event with shadowed participants. These enabled the identification of informal and formal sites of interaction, such as coffee bar areas outside main session rooms, remaining in session rooms between sessions, and sitting in less formal sites and in corridors.

Pre-event agendas were explored with the shadowed participants in the follow-up interviews, along with those that changed during the event. In pilot two, one participant's sense of identity was challenged by going to the event and we charted how being at the event changed his aspirations from one of a deputy headteacher, content with his role, to an aspiring headteacher. It was difficult to pinpoint what it was about the event that sparked these changes as the two elements cited were both incidental to the formal proceedings: a disclosure from his headteacher (that they might leave the position) and a call from the Local Authority during the event about closing the school due to forecast bad weather. Both of these incidents had occurred whilst the participant was not shadowed and raised the importance of following delegates for an entire event because of the unpredictability of such 'articulated moments' (Massey, 1994). Three months after the event, the deputy headteacher reflected on the impact of the event and was only then able to cite changes in knowledge and understanding from the formal aspects of the event, which retrospectively were useful practically in realising his new aspirations.

6.0 Implications of this study

We reflect on the entire data collected over the three pilots (only some of which we have been able to discuss here), to indicate the kinds of advice that can be given to those who organise, attend (or send people to attend), and research events.

6.1 For those organising events

Delegate lists were highly valued, preferably in advance of the event. Delegates frequently look at these lists as the first port of call for an event to: identify who they already know; plan to whom they might speak depending on their own agendas; use as a resource later if further contacts are desired. Information on presenters' expertise was also valued to ascertain the quality or pertinence of the formal aspects of the event to help decide on attending an event. Some delegates welcome links to related reading before the event, others preferred to follow such links after an event, if inspired. The distinction between materials for *all* delegates, as opposed to those with particular interests, needs careful thought. Different delegates value different aspects of the materials; for example summaries of content presented, links to further information, and contact details of presenters were cited.

The nature of the venue should be suited to both formal sessions and to networking activity between sessions. The NCSL building was perceived as a good model with a common open space off the session rooms and other quiet spaces, for informal interaction. Hotels have largely replaced purpose-built establishments (or educational institutions) for professional development events. Although it is important to

delegates that hotels are comfortable and professional, they do not always perceive them as conducive to either formal or informal processes.

6.2 For those sending delegates/delegates

To see an event as one component of a longer-term learning journey could be productive in formulating agenda items for the event. Novice ‘event delegates’ appreciate support in their learning from an event; for example, by modelling strategies at the event, joint attendance with another colleague, and advice on note taking and networking. Attending alone or with colleagues presents different advantages and disadvantages in relation to interactions. Attendance with another, might limit the breadth of interactions, but a more senior colleague could help introduce the less senior to potentially useful contacts through their own wider personal network. Attendance with a peer can offer opportunities by offering a sounding board to reflect on what is being gained from the event. All delegates, even those who were experienced attendees, spoke of their incomplete development of strategies for capturing knowledge and understanding to use back in the workplace.

6.3 For researchers

6.3.1 Advice regarding data collection

Negotiations with event organisers are key to the access of researchers, and different event organisers express different types of concerns. Particular concerns are those of appropriateness or confidentiality in the use of video or still photography. Questionnaires are likely to be seen as an additional burden on participants and a conflict of interests with evaluation by the organisers. Ways forward might include merging of questionnaires along with shared access to the data after the event by researchers and organisers. There may also be related concerns by presenters of feeling evaluated by the research process. Organisers’ concerns over participants’ confidentiality were not matched by those of the delegates, once they were involved. After the initial stage of negotiation with the organisers, there is likely (certainly in the school leader contexts) to be a positive response from delegates when individually approached. Few volunteers signed up to the research in advance of the event, but this did not necessarily imply resistance to it. Exploring better ways to advertise and promote the research in advance might prove productive in increasing the number of respondents. Delegates welcomed shadowing which gives opportunities for brief interviews and conversations during and after the event. Perhaps the term ‘shadowing’ does not do full justice to the researcher-subject relationship achievable; ‘buddying’ might be an alternative. Shadowing is an intensive process and severely restricts the capacity for other data collection by a single researcher, even if only carried out with one delegate for half a day. This has design and staffing implications for research.

6.3.2 Advice regarding analysis

There is a paucity of research in this area and a lack of any clear conceptualisation of what takes place at events in terms of knowledge creation and sharing. Our theorising is therefore tentative and exploratory. Due to our own research experience we were most confident with respect to the personal network strand and the coding of interactional analyses outlined in Table 2. Future work could use this, particularly in structuring observation notes to aid analysis. Specific studies of validity and reliability of coding are still required. Other possible analytical routes, developing analytical frameworks for the other three strands as indicated in Figure 2, need further development as does analysis of the socio-spatial aspects of image analysis.

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² Here we put aside the argument about whether the community of practice is the school (or school department) staff or the larger professional body (or subgroup such as school leaders).

³ This paper gives a summary of the research traditions associated with Social Network Analysis.

⁴ Those who study 'complete' educational networks tend to revert to the participation metaphor, as we indicated in relation to professional learning communities (e.g. Veugelers & O'Hair, 2005).

⁵ Here we are using a different notion of broker from that of say Wenger (1998), one that reflects ideas of network theory. See: MCCORMICK, R. and CARMICHAEL, P. (2005) Theorising and researching teacher learning across schools *ESRC TLRP Seminar Series: Learning to Learn: Supporting learning to learn with face-to-face and computer-mediated communication*. (University of Newcastle)..