

**Workplace learning and (H)PE  
department culture: Is toxic jock syndrome  
too strong a description?**

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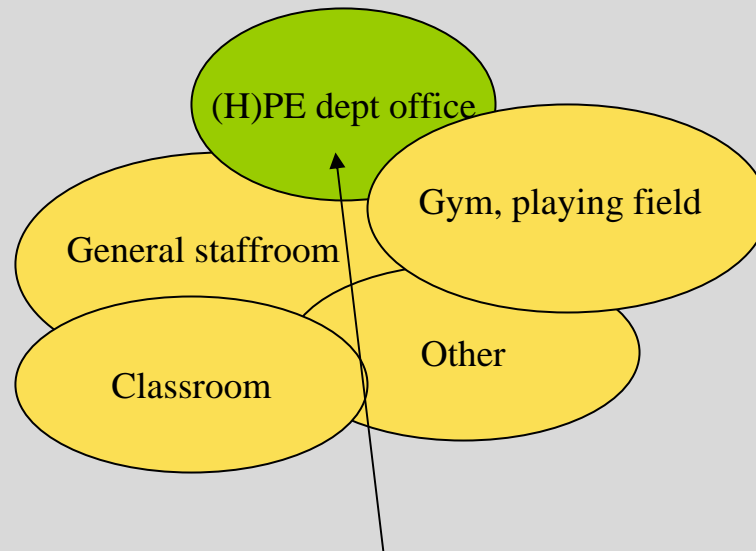
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# Some Context

- HMS has a strong history in PETE
- B.Ed .... BHMS.... BAppSci
- Education, Biological and Chemical Sciences, Health Sciences
  
- In terms of teacher education, The BAppSci is a boutique degree course – the School of Education is NOTinvolved in its delivery at all

# Brian's story

During the student teaching practicum the ITE student will learn to be an (H)PE teacher from their experiences and observations across numerous sites.



This pilot study set out to investigate the (H)PE subject department as a site of professional development for ITE students.

This project is specifically concerned with the extent to which (H)PE subject department culture provides the necessary supportive environment to enhance the development of a student teacher in ways that are consistent with the principles that underpin the HPE KLA.

## Contextual Information

- The KLA of HPE is underpinned by principles of equity, diversity and supportive environments. These principles “... should guide teacher practice and be used to develop student understanding of, and practices which promote, social justice.” (In-Service Materials Queensland, Health and Physical Education, 1999, p. 25)
- The health & physical education teacher education (HPETE) program at The University of Queensland emphasizes principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

## Some assumptions:

The identities (subjectivities) of student teachers and beginning teachers are ‘in process’ as they become HPE teachers (Rossi, 1999; O’Connor & Macdonald, 2002).

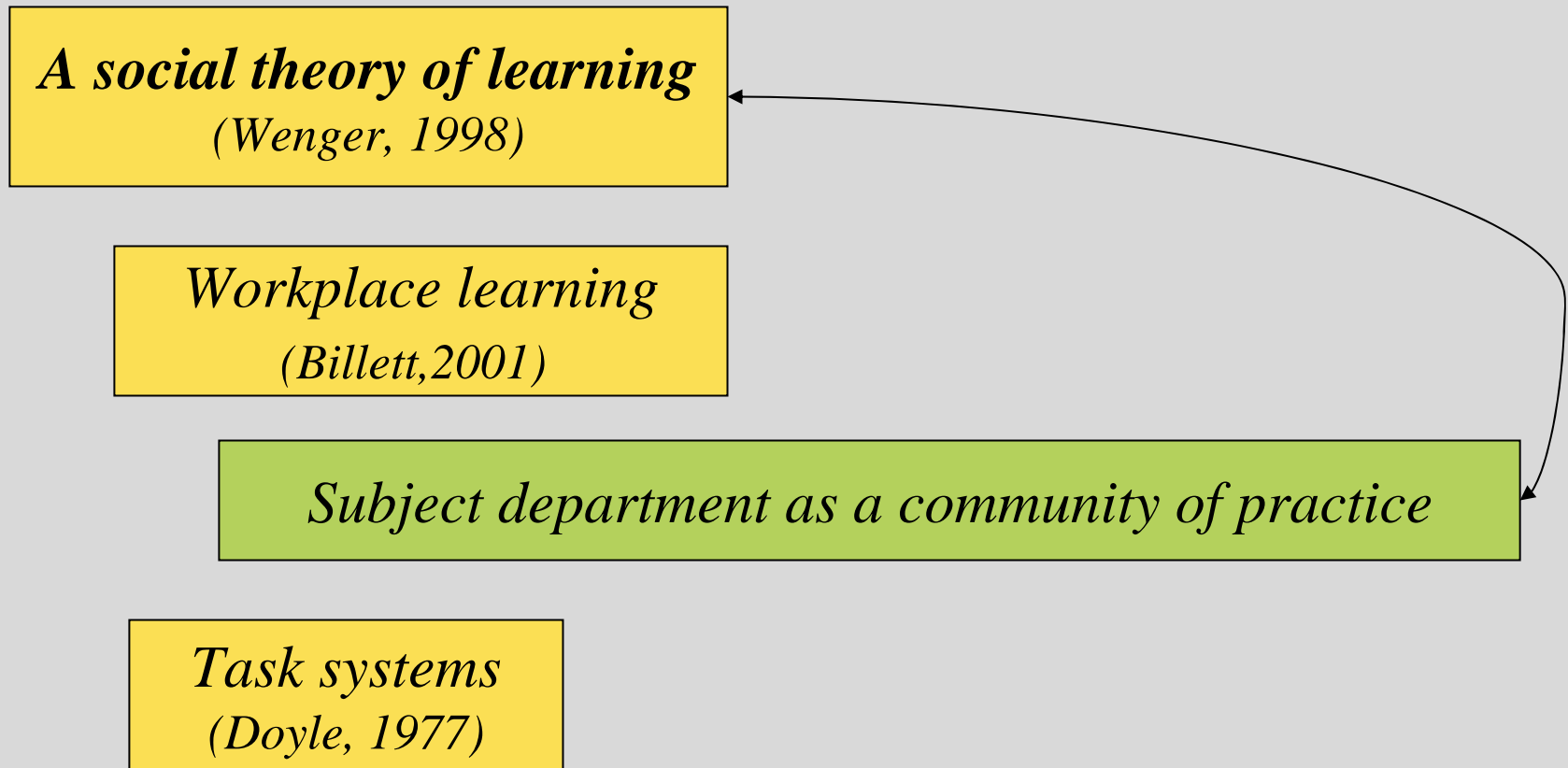
The subject department office (PE or otherwise) is an important space for influencing curriculum and resource decisions and also for professional identity (McGregor, 2003; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2005 – see also the work of the Centre of the Study of Contexts of Teaching @ Stanford).

Teacher identity development can be undermined by negative experiences (Macdonald, 1995), with consequences for pupil learning and teacher attrition.

## Research questions:

- What is the nature of the PE department culture?
- How does the PE department function as a site for workplace learning?
- What is the nature of the professional learning community within the PE department?
- How do student teachers adapt to the subject department culture and what strategies do they employ?

# Conceptual frameworks



*A social theory of learning*  
(Wenger, 1998)

*A social theory of learning.*

According to Wenger (1998: 4)

“the primary focus of this theory is on learning as social participation. Participation here refers not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities.”(*emphasis* in original)

*Workplace learning*  
(Billett, 2001)

*Workplace learning.* Workplace learning has framed several studies of how (and what) learning occurs in the context of industry (Somerville, 2005; Darrah, 1996; Billett, 2001).

Research by Edwards & Protheroe, (2003) and Smith (2005) with preservice teachers and by Horn (2005) and Hodkinson & Hodkinson (2005) with experienced teachers provide rare examples of studies that have applied a similar framework to the context of teacher professional development.

## *Subject department as a community of practice*

During the ITE practicum and during the first year of employment, a secondary school PE teacher will work specifically (but not solely) within the *community of practice* that is comprised of teachers who share the same subject area specialty (in this case PE).



## Variations on 'staff room' or subject department office

(H)PE department staffroom attached to gym\*

(H)PE staff share a staffroom with another subject department

All staff (including HPE) are located in communal staffroom

\* The majority of schools in this study

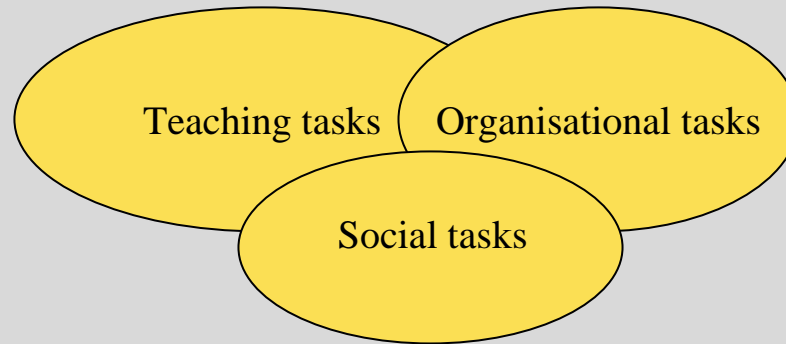
## *Task systems (Doyle, 1977)*

This form of analysis is based on Doyle's (1977) classroom ecology theorising and his conception of a task as a 'set of implicit or explicit instructions about what a person must do to successfully cope with a situation' (p.2).

Three task systems have been identified in student teaching: teaching tasks; organisational tasks; social tasks (Tinning & Siedentop, 1985).

Of significance for this study is the *social task system* that functions to create and maintain cordial social relations between student teacher and significant others in the practicum setting (such as the supervising teacher, other teachers in the PE dept).

## Task systems



Teaching tasks are largely completed in the gym, playing field or where the teaching takes place. Organisational tasks occur both in the teaching space and the (H)PE department office.

Importantly, much of the engagement with the social task system is at the non-conscious level and hence goes largely unrecognized and unexamined. It is what Giddens would call 'routinized' or habitual conduct

Evidence from Laker et al (2003) confirms that many PE departments have a strong male orientation which, at worst, reproduce hegemonic forms of masculinity or ‘hyper-masculinity’ (Dewar, 1990; Brown, 1999).

There is ample evidence that the occupational culture of physical education is a gendered one (eg., Penny, 2002; Macdonald & McKay, 1994; Wright, 1996 & 1999; Macdonald & Kirk, 1996) and, in the context of this study we will be particularly interested in the gendered nature of the staffroom culture.

We are interested in the conditions which make some (H)PE subject departments function as *communities of practice* that are supportive and accommodating of student teachers or beginning teachers and those that are not.



# Methods

- The study followed a cohort of approximately 24 final year ITE student through their final year major practicum of 10 weeks duration.
- There were two data collection phases.
  - Phase I: written reflections from student teachers (email)
  - Phase II: individual semi-formal interviews (following prac)
- Analysis:
  - open or free coding (related to teachers' understandings about themselves and the community)
  - an iterative process of constant comparison between codes.
- Emergent themes related to
  - norms of engagement, shared interests, membership, & negotiated meanings

## **Findings: Learning through participation in the subject department room**

### **A. Sport – conduit for meaning making (mode & content)**

- “In this room there was a lot of talk about sport...or the rugby team...[...]...or more importantly, what happened on the weekend with different sports, not just school sport but national sport as well. That was basically the crux of everything.” (John)

## **Findings: Learning through participation in the subject department room cont'd**

### **B. Identity – team or family member**

- Supporting and helping one another
- Sharing and covering – lesson plans, strategies
- “Everyone’s really helpful, really willing to dig in and help someone else out.” (Dianne)
- “They were quite a family.” (Cheryl)

## **Findings: Learning through participation in the subject department room cont'd**

### **C. Complex & contradictory ways of engaging**

- Easy-going, laid-back
  - “Very laid-back kind of people but very professional in what they do.” (Mark)
- Complicated
  - “So they put me in the middle, made fun of me, told me to get involved and then he [the supervisor] said, ‘Mate, you might need to bring it back.’ So, it was very hard to know where you stood.” (Brian)

## **Findings: Learning through participation in the subject department room cont'd**

- Organisational modes
  - Limited talk of curriculum, technical (what, how)
  - Good technician conflated with professional
  - “We had quite a few meetings and stuff about how to test, acquire, apply, and evaluate.” (Sam)
- Negotiating modes of interacting (repertoires)

## **Findings: Learning through participation in the subject department room cont'd**

### **D. Jokes, teasing, & pranks\*** – terms of engagement

- Women as targets, sexist, sexual
- Behaviours: increase as male: female ratio increases
- : excused and/or naturalised
  
- “They were quite rude and vulgar [HPE staff] and a lot of swearing but it was all in good fun.” (Susan)
- “It’s just what they do. It was their little joke to break me down a bit.” (Brian, cricket ball thrown at his head)

*\* Toxic jock syndrome?*

## **Findings: Learning through participation in the subject department room cont'd**

- “There were often jokes and stuff being sent around emails, often some rude ones which were pretty funny, some stereotypical blonde jokes and that sort of stuff...everyone had a good laugh and no one took it to heart.” (Patty)

## **Findings: Learning through participation in the subject department room cont'd**

- “It [sexist, sexual mode of engaging] wasn’t anything that you’d take personally. Well I never did. I guess there are some people who were quite prim and proper and didn’t like that sort of thing and might get offended but if you had a pretty good sense of humour and were relaxed you got along really well.” (Susan)
- “Hey guys, I’m still here.” [female HPE teacher, put on headphones in response to men telling jokes about women]

## Struggling with the social task system

- A. ‘Natural’ – perceived alignment
- B. Reading and negotiating implicit and explicit norms
- C. Risk and uncertainty – which tasks, who, time
  - Helpful, talking about sport, feigning interest, building relationships, accommodating, reading the climate
- “If you play the game a little bit and get to know them a bit better, that’s a good thing...[...]...just being involved in whatever.” (Eric)

## Struggling with the social task system cont'd

- “...toward the end I got a bit more laid-back but I always had my guard up being a prac student.” (Jen)
- “I wouldn’t have felt comfortable being a stickler for saying ‘but I’m supposed to be doing this.’ So, it was whatever the attitude is, I’ll go along with this.” (Olivia)
- “It’s always in the back of your mind (rating) and it’s so hard to have that.” (Jason)

## Struggling with the social task system cont'd

- “...walking the fine line between looking really keen and getting in the way.” (Gina)
- “I did make a few cups of coffee for people – that was trying to fit in.” (Cheryl)

## **Summary: Troubling learning and identity in the HPE subject department room**

- Limit curriculum talk to technical (what, how)
- Negotiate explicit and implicit expectations
- High stakes decisions - organisational and social tasks
- Being professional conflated with competent technician
- Norms (diversity, gender, age, ability, body) entrenched and enforced through practice (e.g., jokes, comments)

## **Summary: Troubling learning and identity in the HPE subject department room cont'd**

- Ways of engaging are situation dependent
- “It doesn’t sound like it but my supervisor was a very laid-back guy in the room [department], joking around, mucking around, but as soon as he was in the classroom he was one of the most switched on guys. He was brilliant.”  
(Brian)

## Troubling thoughts

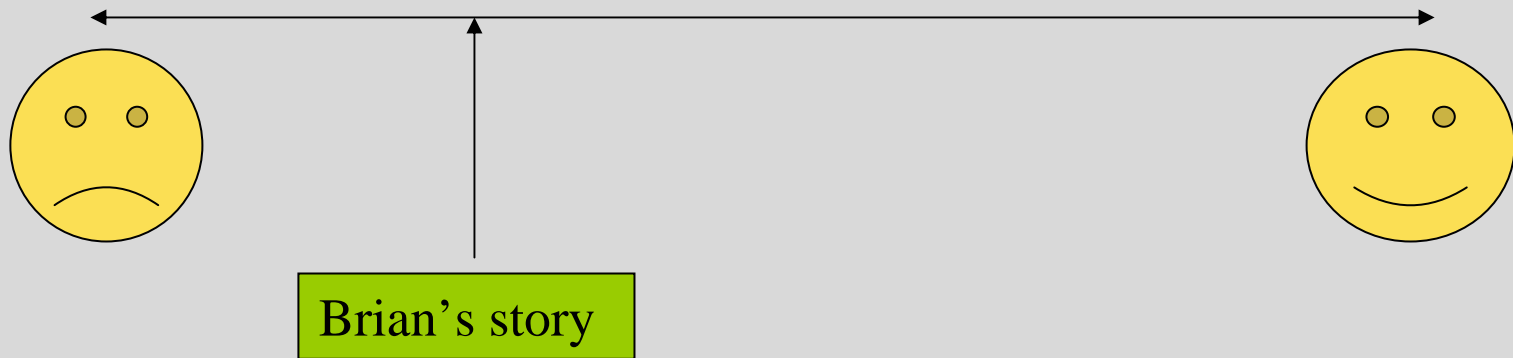
- From our observations and conversations with student teachers it was not apparent that the principles underpinning the HPE KLA were lived out in the (H)PE department staffroom.
- We wonder about the extent to which these principles are really valued and embodied by the teachers and, in turn, the sorts of dispositions and identities student teachers are constructing.

## Troubling thoughts cont'd

- Many of these supervising teachers were graduates of our program - a program that places considerable emphasis on principles of diversity, equity, inclusion in (H)PE.
- Given the power dynamics in which the student teacher is immersed, we expect that if they are emotionally committed to the principles of the KLA they would struggle to construct identities consistent with that commitment for in doing so they would have to contradict or resist the dominant norms of the (H)PE community.

*“It is not easy to become a radically new person in the same community of practice...” (Wenger, 1998, p. 89)*

## Not all PE departments are the same



What (H)PE dept cultures might we consider toxic (harmful to ITE student development) and where to we draw the line?

# Things to consider

- Legitimate Peripheral Learning – In some cases the peripheral learning was of the ‘toxic’ type – but with students’ sense of ‘becoming’ and a move to the centre it became normal or ‘normalized’ (Foucault)
- If it was normalized was it ‘benign compliance’ based on power and on the power of the ‘gaze’
- An example of ‘Textual Collusion’ (Fuller and Lee)
- A further possible explanation could be drawn from Erving Goffman’s notion of ‘front’

## We are left with more questions

- Notwithstanding the practical issues that would ensue, should we continue to tolerate students going into to (H)PE department contexts that might be described as toxic?
- Does the staffroom behaviour reflect more accurately the teachers' lack of emotional commitment to the values of the KLA? Do they just don a particular persona when they go out to teach? Does it really matter?
- Does what happens (and what is learnt) in the subject department really matter as long as the ITE students learn to become competent at the teaching and organisational tasks?
- Is it better to have (H)PE teachers in staffrooms with other subject teachers to dilute the toxic jock syndrome?

# Finally

- None of the reviews of teacher education that we have read considered the *community of practice* of the staffroom or subject department as an issue of concern for teacher professional development. We believe it is within (H)PE.
- In our view, we need to more fully explore the complicated and at times tacitly held norms and social dynamics of pedagogical spaces such as the (H)PE subject department room.

**Thank you for listening**