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INTRODUCTION

This chapter is essentially in two parts.

The first outlines aspects of the theory of learning communities and communities of practice as they can apply to university and college education – and to debates about widening participation, in particular.

The second gives very brief – thumbnail – sketches of three features common across UK (and especially English) higher education which partially reflect these debates: modularisation; forums for cross-disciplinary debate about teaching and learning and ‘lifelong learning networks’ designed to stimulate, facilitate and expand movement of staff and students between FE and HE, as well as the development of courses to help widen participation.

Overall, the chapter tries to show how the focus of widening participation practitioners and, indeed, policy-makers had for years ignored theories of learning communities and communities of practice because they had been preoccupied with enabling more students from under-represented groups to get into university and hardly at all with what happened to them once inside the academy.

It goes on to tease out the implications of a partial re-focus on these concepts for our understanding of widening participation, and some of the tensions which exist between these concepts and features of contemporary structures and approaches in universities and colleges.

The final sentence of the chapter neatly summarises what lies at the heart of the significance, and the challenge of deploying these concepts within a strategy for widening participation. As I wrote at the time,

To re-think the higher education experience in these ways would undoubtedly challenge the structures and distribution of power within institutions but unless a move in this direction is made it is less likely that sustained change in patterns of student participation and success in higher education (and the wider social and economic benefits this can bring) will be achieved.