

# ***From School to Work: an Apprenticeship in Institutional Identity***

*Penelope Eckert  
and  
Etienne Wenger*

Institute for Research on Learning  
April 1994

The school and the corporate workplace are two settings with obvious differences, but also with important similarities. One fundamental similarity is that they are both institutions, and thus in both cases, a central aspect of living within them is to know how to deal with the institution. This knowledge includes what the institution is about, how it works, what it requires of one and one's peers, what one's place within it is and can be. As this knowledge is acquired and enacted in practice, it comes to constitute a sense of oneself as a participant in an institution: it becomes part of one's institutional identity.

As a form of learning, the construction of an institutional identity is an important part of the experience of schooling. It is not part of the curriculum, and it need not be: it takes place as an apprenticeship in practice, whether the school wants it or not. It is part and parcel of the institutional package. It comes with the diploma, and without it.

From this perspective, therefore, a critical aspect of the issue of the transition from school to the workplace has to do with institutional identities: it has to do with the kinds of institution each of them are, the ways in which they are similar and different as institutions, and the ways in which institutional identities formed in one can function in the other.

We develop this perspective by drawing parallels between observations from our respective ethnographic work conducted in two institutional settings: a Detroit suburban high school, which we will refer to as Belten High, and a major US insurance company, which we will refer to as Alinsu. Penelope Eckert followed one graduating class through their last three years of school in

a Detroit suburban public high school. Etienne Wenger went through training with a cohort of new medical insurance claim processors, and followed them into their initial work assignments and their assimilation into a processing unit.<sup>1</sup> What concerns us in this joint work is what constitutes the transition from participation in the high school to participation in the claim processing workplace.

## **Institutional practices**

We start with two assumptions about institutional identities. First, we assume that institutional identities are not just functions, but that they are the enactment of an understanding of institutional practices, and thus imply ways of being in and seeing the world. Second, we assume that they are not just labels or titles, but are constructed in the day-to-day practice of learning to live within an institution.

Our ethnographic observations in both school and corporate settings have led us to conclude that the day-to-day practice of living within an institution is not primarily configured at the level of the institution itself, but rather within local *communities of practice*.

A community of practice is an aggregate of people who come together around some enterprise. United by this common enterprise, these people come to develop and share ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values—in short, practices—as a function of their joint involvement in mutual activity. Social relations form around the activities, the activities form around relationships, and particular kinds of knowledge and expertise become part of individuals' identities and places in the community. It is not the assemblage or the purpose that defines the community of practice; rather, a community of practice is simultaneously defined by its membership and the shared practice in which that membership is engaged.

The enterprise of living within a given institution is one that a number of people share, and they form communities of practice as they come together to

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<sup>1</sup> Detailed reports of the findings from these studies can be found in Eckert (1989) and in Wenger (1991 and 1998).

configure this enterprise. In this process, any number of very different communities of practice can form in response to the same institutional structure. The knowledge that participants gain of the same institution and the institutional identities they construct can therefore be very different depending on the specific communities of practice in which they configure their institutional life.

Complex institutions give rise to a very wide variety of forms of participation, and to a correspondingly wide variety of communities of practice in which these forms of participation are realized. Here, we merely contrast two extreme types of institutional practices: on the one hand, corporate practices, which support full engagement—and indeed identification—with the institution; and on the other hand, marginal practices, which develop as participants strive to survive in the institution without being engaged in it.

## **Corporate practices**

Numerous books and movies have broadcast now familiar images of the corporate practices of the workplace: the business luncheons, the all-important golf game, the company jet, the corporate spouse displayed at the critical executive dinner party, the late hours, the career moves, the reputation, the personal contacts, the strategic friendships. While these images are no doubt somewhat caricatural, they do find corroboration in careful studies of the workplace.<sup>2</sup> In any case, both popular images and academic studies are indicative of practices in which the personal is fashioned after the institutional and in which the corporate employment of personal resources requires strong identification with one's institutional functions. These practices are not restricted to the corporate headquarters and the boardrooms. Versions of them pervade corporate hierarchies at all echelons as individuals jockey for position and negotiate their mobility.

It has been less publicized, perhaps, that the prototypical normative US high school student too is a corporate individual: students engaged with the institution are expected to base their friendships, networks, activities, and identities within the school, and indeed to mold them onto the formal structure

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, the work of Robert Jackall (1988) and Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977).

of the institution. Though the students who fit this corporate profile have different names in different regions and at different times (“jocks,” “rahrahs,” “collegiates,” “soc’s,” “preppies,” etc.), they seem to be an enduring fixture of US high schools. They are college and middle-class bound, and base their lives and identities in the school’s extracurricular sphere and its corporate practice. In the school that served as the site for the high school study, these students came largely from middle-class homes and were called “jocks,” which is the term we adopt here.

The jocks constitute themselves as corporate beings and the knowledge they develop as they participate in school as jocks supports this constitution. The corporate character of jock practice is nowhere more apparent than in the extracurricular sphere, and in the intimate relation between the extracurricular sphere and all other aspects of life in the school. School personnel control resources, such as space, supplies, and legitimation, for the development of corporate activities (e.g. dances, floats, banner competitions, pep rallies). Students compete for management of the resources, building “careers” through the strategic use and distribution of these resources among the student body and through the planning and execution of successful activities.

Whether in school or in the workplace, success in controlling and managing corporate resources depends on the ability to find one’s way around the institution—to know where resources related to the production of activities are, who controls them, what it takes to gain control, and so on. This requires knowledge of people and their formal roles, but also crucially of the informal relations that articulate with the formal. It is partially the need for such rich social and professional information—which can only come with the regular and time-consuming servicing of networks—that makes it necessary for professionals to merge their personal and work identities.

It is just such a merger that is required of high school students for success in the school’s extracurricular sphere. In this merger of the informal and the formal, daily participation in the jock sphere brings a gradual building of key knowledge about the people in corporate roles that make up the institution. As a result, jocks develop a very rich and textured map of the structure and resources at the extracurricular center, which makes the corporate structure of the school quite transparent and affords jocks a kind of empowerment and

mobility. Furthermore, the merger of friendship and corporate networks makes jocks' personal relationships simultaneously corporate relationships, giving their friendships and romances a kind of legitimacy, and giving institutional status to their social activities as well. Jock activities and friendships are seen as functioning in the service of corporate activity. At the same time, the corporate status of jock relationships leads jocks to view their relationships with a strategic eye, and to allow their school interests to inform their choice of friends and not vice-versa.

In addition, because of their corporate status, the jocks emerge in a semi-collegial relation to teachers. Jocks value teachers to the extent that they have access to legitimate resources, and to the extent to which they are responsive to student status in dispensing these resources. Teachers who are thus valued are incorporated as extensions of jock networks, and information about their corporate roles and their formal and informal relations with other teachers and students becomes important corporate knowledge. Jocks know how teachers feel about each other, they know about their formal and their informal relations, their relative power and authority, etc. Thus when they are seeking resources, jocks know not only the formal means to approach those resources, but the informal relations that give life to the formal. This puts them in a position to broker, peddle influence, and manipulate—in short to work the system.

The identification of personal and institutional life is characteristic of corporate practices in both school and the workplace. Indeed, to the extent that individual identity is based on corporate activity, such identity is part of the institution's identity. And since corporate activity cannot be engaged in by solitary individuals, individual identities, corporate communities of practice, and institution are all mutually constitutive, in a mutually reinforcing relation.

## **Marginality at school**

In sharp contrast to the corporate practices of the jocks and away from the limelight of extracurricular activities are the marginal practices of those students who, for a variety of reasons, do not accept the corporate possibilities of the school, and in fact set themselves in direct opposition to them. Though they too are known under different names in different regions and at different times (“burnouts,” “greasers,” “hoods,” “stoners,” “grits,” etc.), they too seem to

be an enduring fixture of US high schools. They do not view the school as a center of social life; they reject its corporate practice, and they base their lives and identities in the neighborhood and the local community. Both this rejection and this outside base confine them to the margins of the school. At the high school of the study, these students came largely from working-class homes and were called “burnouts,” the term we adopt here.

The burnouts reject the corporate practices in part because the competitive and hierarchical social relations that accompany these practices in the school violate many of their most cherished values. To them, the broad networking typical of corporate practices can only be at the expense of the most valued kind of social relation, close friendship:

I just think that they're all competing to be better than each other. And trying to get as many friends as possible, and they're competing and they're great. And I don't agree with that at all. I think you should be who you are, and do what you want, and not try to impress everybody by being Joe Athlete, or Joe Float Builder. I think it's been like that for quite a long time. I don't even know when it—junior high school is really when the first pressure starts. I don't know. Because if you have a lot of friends and not very many close friends, I think you're cheating yourself, because you don't have anybody to confide in, or anybody to really trust. Because you don't really know, you know, if you just have a broader range of friends.

Burnouts' friendships commonly date back to childhood and the neighborhood. In this context, loyalty, egalitarianism, solidarity, and autonomy from adults are key values. Burnouts' interests are generally constructed within the context of the friendship group, independent of school, and are commonly not school-sanctioned interests (for instance, burnout boys' interests in motorcycle racing do not fit into the school's activity structure). And not only do burnout friendships networks originate outside of school, they extend beyond the school into other age groups and into Detroit. Burnout friendships and romances, therefore, are seen as detracting from, rather than serving, the school, and school personnel in general view burnout friendships with suspicion.

The burnouts see the school from start to finish as a paternalistic institution that seeks to confine and control participants, and they see the roles that the school

offers as infantilizing. From their locally-oriented perspective, the burnouts do not see the school as fostering the development of mature roles in the wider community, but turning in on itself and fostering roles in the high school community. Rejecting the school as a locus of social life, the burnouts view school activities, school roles and school status as existing only for their own sake. Disengaged from corporate practice, then, burnouts have no access to collegial relations with teachers, nor do they desire such relations. While burnouts may develop warm relations with certain teachers, they see these relations, like their friendships with peers, as transcending rather than belonging to and reproducing the institutional. In general, though, burnouts' adversarial relationship with the school generally tends to an adversarial relationship with teachers, and because of their marginal practice, burnouts are primarily concerned with teachers' gatekeeping functions. Where jocks' relationships with teachers tend to focus on gaining access to school resources, burnouts seek a relation to teachers that will serve the negotiation of their way around the margins of the school. They focus on knowing the teachers and administrators who have gatekeeping responsibilities (vice principals, hall monitors, etc.), on knowing those teachers' personalities and limits, and on knowing school regulations, to which which they try to hold personnel. Thus where jocks focus on working within the system, burnouts focus on maintaining a technical relation with the system—dealing with the school in terms of its rules and regulations. Teachers' use for the burnouts articulates well with this. Since burnout cooperation does not enhance the teacher's status in the corporate hierarchy, and since teachers' careers also depend on maintaining boundaries without and order within, teachers' relations with burnouts center around boundary maintenance. Boundary maintenance involves setting criteria for participation in school, and eliminating from the institution those whose performance does not meet those criteria.

The threat of infantilization informs not only burnouts' relations with school personnel but also their attitude toward the knowledge that the school dispenses. The burnouts do not generally consider the school to be a trusted source of relevant knowledge. The age-heterogeneous character of their networks gives them early exposure to older behavior, experiences, and prerogatives (such as cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, sex, contact with the law, and the emotional difficulties that may accompany these). This exposure in turn

creates a need for certain kinds of information (about such things as the effects of drugs, sex, birth control, legal rights), earlier than adults are willing to give it to them. This means that from a fairly early age, burnouts cease to view adults as ready to meet their most pressing informational needs. And these needs are being met, however inadequately, by older members of the peer group. This kind of information does not come from a single source, and it does not come from an authority figure who can or would apply norms or strictures on the acquisition and use of that information.

Furthermore, the school does not provide the workplace-bound with the same bridge to adulthood as it does for the college-bound. Information about college does not flow in burnout networks, as witnessed by the following burnout's account in the course of some discussion of what she was going to do after high school:

Alice:	I— I kind of want to be an art teacher, but you have to go through a lot to be something like that.
<i>PENELOPE</i>	<i>HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT OF GOING TO COLLEGE?</i>
Alice	Yeah, my parents said, “Well, you know, if you want to go to college we’ll pay your way,” so why not, you know.
<i>PENELOPE</i>	<i>YEAH. DO THEY WANT YOU TO?</i>
Alice	Yeah. I’m— I’m pretty— I think, you know, if I really get my stuff together in art, you know, really get into it I— I probably will try to be an art teacher.
<i>PENELOPE</i>	<i>UM, ARE YOU TAKING COURSES AND STUFF THAT YOU HAVE TO TAKE TO GO TO COLLEGE?</i>
Alice	Um, I re— I’m not really aware of, you know, what I have to do to be in college, but I— I think I’ve got a low grade— you know— grade average pretty much.

Burnouts are thus left to construct their own bridges to adulthood, and they seek to extend their networks outside of school, gaining access to community resources. They only cultivate school-based networks insofar as those networks provide them with connections to the community. The map that burnouts develop of the school is richly elaborated around the margins, and not at all elaborated at the corporate center. This map, however, is an adjunct to a map of the community. It facilitates invisibility in school and exit to the



community without. It does not, on the other hand, carry much information about how the institution functions and views itself at its corporate center.

Both jocks and burnouts are learning institutional practice in school. Functioning at the center and margins of the school, however, they have very different views of the institution and its preoccupations. The forms of participation that they develop thus give them very different understandings of the institution and its practices. At the same time, their differing orientations to the local and adjacent urban community yield different understandings of the world outside the school.

## **Marginality at work**

Many of the medical insurance claims processors at Alinsu reported having been burnouts in high school. It is the corresponding kind of institutional orientation and knowledge that they brought to the workplace.

Like the burnouts' view of school, the claim processors see the workplace as a necessity, but not the center of their social worlds. Their most significant activities and relations take place in their private lives, which are seen as clearly distinct from work. It is understood by them and by those in charge of their employment that they are there to make some money in order to pursue their lives, whose meaningfulness they see outside of the office.

And like the burnouts, the claim processors do not feel any connection to the corporate hierarchy of their institution, even to the local management.

For one thing, I don't really know [them]. Sure I say hi to them, but they don't really make themselves, you know, known to us. Like we just know their names, we don't know what kind of a person they are, we don't, we don't know anything. They just, they're just there. We don't really know what they do, we don't really know anything about them.

What happens beyond the confines of the local office, then, seems extremely distant and vague in their minds, and mostly irrelevant to their own participation. The corporation is an institution to which they understand their direct accountability in terms of employment contract and production

measurements, but which remains an alien entity in terms of the practices that make it function.

The claim processors' only real connection to the corporate practices of the institution is their direct supervisor, who used to be a claim processor, but whose function and status now straddle management and unit membership. As a result, their relationship with their supervisor is one of profound ambivalence. On the one hand, she is not thought to have much authority:

She is just a glorified processor; she does not have any power, can't hire and fire or make any serious decision without the consent of the home office.

Indeed, the supervisor spends most of her time with her unit, and is too much like a peer to represent a window onto a different practice. What she represents mainly is an alien authority, to which she is subjected as much as her subordinates.

On the other hand, friendship among claim processors is not integral to the institution (and mainly seen as developing outside of it). Friendship ties are thus complicated by institutional distinctions, with which they are perceived as incompatible. Thus the supervisor's new institutional function creates a distance that cannot be bridged easily:

And then you can see who is like, friends with their supervisor too. ... And you don't want to get too involved with those people because they are going to talk on you.

Like the burnouts, claim processors find the institution infantilizing. It is a source of authority, which they view as uninterested in their development as persons. One claim processor who went to an all-girl private school saw little difference in the way she was treated in the workplace:

It's like an all-girl school, with all the little rules, etc. Six months ago you could have anything you wanted on your desk. You should have seen some of those desks with stuffed animals all over. Then management came and said they could not have these stuffed animals. They thought it looked unprofessional. ... Like you can't come in with shorts. They take disciplinary actions for this or that.

Note the tension between professionalism and the presence of private lives at work. Paradoxically, the very visible presence of personal objects at work is actually a mark of the distance rather than the congruence between private and institutional lives. Because of the cleavage of the two, it is part of the “congeniality” of the institution to accept some intrusion from this foreign world as a friendly gesture. But it is then also part of management functions to do some boundary management in order to prevent a disruptive invasion. (This relation between the private and the institutional is profoundly different from, say, hosting an executive dinner at home or appearing with one’s family on a photograph for the business press).

Some processors, mainly those with substantial work experience, resent the infantilizing character of their relations with the institution. For instance, one of them had to make up time on rare days when she was late and was irritated by the pettiness of the rules and of the disregard for her general attitude.

I’m sorry. I am a responsible adult. I feel like a kindergartner when they do that. And I don’t like that. That irritates me. Especially in view of the fact that I do come in early. I never take my afternoon break. And there is no give-and-take still.

What her comment reveals is not only the infantilizing attitude of the corporation, but also the estrangement caused by her distance from the kind of corporate practice that would allow her to negotiate her relation with the institution in terms she would find reasonable.

## **Proceduralization as marginality**

Nowhere is the marginal character of the claim processors’ practice more evident than in the way their work has been proceduralized, that is, transformed into fixed sequences of small, well-defined steps. Even if claim processors are not personally engaged in the business itself, they must know how to do their job or claims will not be processed. Proceduralization allows them to be told exactly what to do while remaining in a marginal position: their marginality is thus institutionalized all the way down to the daily details of work.

It is the claim processor’s responsibility to determine the amount of payment of claims—an activity that one might believe is indeed at the heart of the

Benefit Reduction Worksheet

A.	Agg Prev Alinsu Benefit	\$ _____	(C Prev. Stmt.)
B.	Al Ben Current Claim	+ _____	
C.	Tot Al Agg Benefit	= _____	
D.	Agg Prev Medicare Benefit	_____	(F Prev. Stmt.)
E.	Medicare Ben Current Claim	+ _____	
F.	Total Medicare Agg Ben	_____	
G.	Al Total Liability (C - F)	_____	
H.	Al Prev Payments	- _____	(J Prev. Stmt.)
I.	Ben now due (enter 0 if negative figure results)	- _____	
J.	Total Al Payments released (H + I)	\$ _____	

*I* \*\*C, F, J must be noted in claimant file for future calculations.

Figure 1. A calculation worksheet

insurance industry. One might think that such work would require subtle knowledge about the ins and outs of insurance policies and health care. However, with calculation worksheets and fixed sequences of computer screens requesting information, the work of claim processing is proceduralized to a point that claim processors do not, and are not expected to, develop the knowledge that underlies the decisions that they “make” and pass on to clients.

Figure 1 shows an example of a calculation worksheet that claim processors use to determine payment when both Medicare and Alinsu are involved. Note

how, if one knows where to find the figures C, F, and G, in the computer file and the two figures for lines B and E on the current claim, one can perform the entire calculation without any knowledge of what the figures or operations refer to. And indeed, neither in the training class nor in the course of work were the labels of the lines discussed in terms of what the calculation was about.

The procedural nature of this approach to such calculations is underlined by the fact that claim processors do not call this procedure by its official name “coordination by benefit reduction.” Instead, they call it the “C, F, and J thing” among themselves. This nickname that refers to the most important lines they have to fill out reflects their perspective on the meaning of the form.

While the company considers the procedural knowledge as embodied in this worksheet adequate to the claim processors’ work, the processors actually have responsibilities that require more textured knowledge. Their job includes not only processing claims, but answering telephone inquiries from customers about the benefits that they have (or have not) received. To answer such queries, claim processors must develop a conceptual understanding of their work in terms of equitability, profitability, and other principles that underlie the procedures that they apply. There are times when their access to the broader meaning of procedural rules is insufficient for answering customers adequately. Thus, there is a certain amount of frustration with the inadequacy of the knowledge provided to do the job.

Sheila:	I understand it. I just don’t know how to explain it to a caller. I know how to do it on the computer, everything just fine. And I can do, you know, when it’s not ‘C, F, and J,’ I can explain that just fine. But when it comes to ‘C, F, and J,’ it’s like you said in the meeting, you can’t tell them ‘I subtracted this line from this line,’ you can’t do that. And I don’t know what to tell, that’s the only thing.
<i>ETIENNE:</i>	<i>SO YOU REALLY DON’T UNDERSTAND THE MEANING OF WHAT ALINSU IS TRYING TO DO THERE?</i>
Sheila:	Not really.
<i>ETIENNE:</i>	<i>NOT REALLY? AND THE MEETING THAT [THE UNIT] HAD [WITH AN INSTRUCTOR] DID NOT HELP?</i>

- Sheila: No, because she did not tell us why we were doing it, she just told us 'this is how you do it.' And I don't really think she told us why.
- Maureen: She never went into it, just that it was an aggregate thing for the whole year. So I guess that's all you need to know: there is an aggregate.

Complaints of customer dissatisfaction and the resulting unit meeting alluded to in the dialogue did not lead to substantial changes in the situation. But however frustrating some of their phone conversations may be, the claim processors do not find the procedural approach to be particularly bizarre. Rather, they accept the way the institution presents itself to them and the degree to which it reveals its operating principles. At work they constitute a local practice that allows them to live with this acceptance and get the job done in the terms defined by the institution. And then they go home.

## **Marginality as institutional practice**

The corporation's view of itself and the claim processors' view of it are as different as the burnouts' and school personnel's views of the school. The marginal existence that burnouts learn to maintain in high school is reproduced in the claim processors' workplace through the compartmentalization of the work of claim processing within the corporation and the overall practice of the insurance business.

While the jocks feel that the school is there for them and seek, therefore, to learn what allows them to further their corporate mission, the burnouts maintain their distance from an institution that they find has no commitment to them. They view it as simply fulfilling a contract to provide limited and impersonal service. They, in turn, have no commitment to the school except for the commitment to complete their contractual arrangement that will enable them to leave with a diploma, facilitating their pursuit of fulfillment elsewhere. That fulfillment will not be institutional, but a coming-of-age of their extra-institutional interests, with the simple material support facilitated by institutional participation.

The burnouts form a community of practice in school out of a need to find ways to exist there that neither implicate them in corporate practice nor cost them

their participation in the institution; and that at the same time allow them to foster a strong sense of identity and participation in their own broader community. One can say precisely the same of claim processors. Within and in response to the institutional framework, claim processors form a community of practice whose practice is not only to process claims, but also to create a context for constructing a viable identity as a worker. Friendships, activities, and mutual help on the job develop around a shared place in the organization that is defined by a fairly narrow access to company knowledge and practice, and limited job mobility. Thus opportunities to take classes that might go more deeply into the workings of the process are generally not taken up, because such knowledge does not appear to enhance participation in the workplace community of practice.

Indeed, processors work together to construct the kind of knowledge they feel they need in order to process claims and answer telephone inquiries. Within these boundaries, they are very inventive. But they strike a careful balance between adequacy for this purpose and developing a deeper understanding of insurance practice. Just like the burnouts, the claim processors generate an active mix of knowledge and ignorance where ignorance is not only the absence of certain knowledge, but its rejection. Certain knowledge is rejected both because it is irrelevant and because showing interest in it would violate the claim processors' sense of their tacit contract with the corporation—a tacit contract of mutual lack of interest.

A lot of the energy of the local community of practice is to make existence there a realization of that contract that is personally satisfying. Their common experience of marginality becomes the core of a jointly constructed practice that reflects their place in the institution as marginal and distantly contractual. It is in such a practice that they enact their understanding of the institution and sustain their institutional identities. And the workplace, just like the school, is designed to make this possible.

## **Institutional identities as transition**

The reasons for the similarities in institutional structure between the school and the corporation are broad and complex. It is not within the scope of this paper

to even begin to undertake an analysis of these reasons. Rather our intention is to point to an aspect of the transition from school to the workplace that is often overlooked in traditional approaches to the issue.

The notion of transition that we want to draw attention to has to do with a continual construction of the self in relation to institutions and to the communities that arise and endure within those institutions. This process of construction is embedded in participation in communities of practice, and involves the construction of the kinds of knowledge that shape one's beliefs about and ways of participating in institutions. Knowledge related to school and to work is inseparable from one's identity as a participant in the communities—as students and later as workers—that populate the institutions of school and work.

If one adopts the view that schools are primarily curricular delivery systems, one will think of the transition from school to work in terms of elements of knowledge packaged in such a way that their acquisition in school makes them relevant and applicable in the workplace. If one thinks of schools as preparatory institutions, one might think of the transition in terms of institutional linkages, with exercises and peripheral exposure that connect participation in the school to participation in the workplace.

Our view of schools as social institutions of a corporate character is combined with our view of knowledge as integral part of social identities developed through participation in practice. This combined perspective suggests that the curricular and the preparatory views are at best incomplete.

Institutional identities are both inevitable and reflective of the institution. An identity is not something that can be packaged or drilled. Rather, it is a trajectory of participation that reflects the actual practices of specific communities and specific forms of participation in these practices. As a trajectory, an identity is not an object that one owns once and for all: it is defined over time, it evolves, and it has a momentum of its own. It is what gives a flexible continuity to the various forms of participation one is engaged in.

What claim processors do and do not know about their work and their institution is thus not something that is primarily determined by their inherent



ability to learn or even by information they do or do not have. They learn the practice of their community readily in all its complexity, and perhaps all too well. Information that is deemed relevant circulates so fast, it could not be stopped should it be considered damaging. But an institutional identity requires a subtle balancing act when one is torn between participation and non-participation.

Like the burnouts in school, the claim processors find forms of participation in the workplace that do not engage them to see the larger structure of the workplace or the meaning of their own work within it. The opaque character of the institution limits their access to resources that would allow them to build an understanding of what their job is about within the corporation and the broader health care system. And their response to this opaque character is a demurely defiant acceptance of it.

The structure and meaning of the corporate workings of the workplace, like the school, are opaque to those whose practices are marginal in it. And marginality as a way of life then constitutes a meaningful response to the institution. For burnouts starting on a job, this situation is intimately familiar, and the institutional identities they have so successfully learned in school just fit right in.

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