

An Exploration of Evolving Learning Communities in the Micro Firm Rural Tourism Context: A Multi-Country Study

David Aylward BBS (Hons.)

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School of Business

Waterford Institute of Technology

Research Supervisors: Dr Felicity Kelliher and Dr Leana Reinl

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Declaration

The author hereby declares that, except where duly noted and referenced, this research study and resulting thesis is entirely his own work and has not been submitted for any degree or other qualification in Waterford Institute of Technology or any other third level institution in Ireland or internationally.

Signed: _____ David Aylward,
July 2016

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents and in memory of my Uncle Matthew and grandparents Daniel, James and Mary.

Abstract

Author: David Aylward

Title of the dissertation: An Exploration of Evolving Learning Communities in the Micro Firm Rural Tourism Context: A Multi-Country Study.

Rural stakeholder collaborations are considered pivotal to successful rural development. In this context a growing body of micro firm related tourism research acknowledges the value of collaborative learning networks and the learning relationships that develop within. However little research reveals how micro firms learn independently in the practice of tourism development in an ‘evolving learning community’ context. Drawing from Lave and Wenger’s (1991) community of practice perspective, this research seeks to explore the elements and relationships that influence learning in an evolving learning community (LC) in the micro firm rural tourism context. An evolving LC is defined as a group of businesses (micro firms) who collaborate with one another and other stakeholders in their community for the purpose of tourism development; in doing so they build shared meaning and learn in practice, as the community evolves from one stage to another.

A comprehensive literature review reveals key criteria which influence evolving LC structures and interrelationships. These criteria are explored through two longitudinal interpretive case studies in tourism practitioner communities in Canada and Wales. Employed research techniques comprised interviews, observation, LC communication review and reflective diary maintenance. The findings offer insights into how the catalyst, structure and leadership, learning strategies, LC resources, communication, participation and identity and boundary criteria support or impede micro firm learner autonomy and influence the evolving LC’s learning dynamic. Recommendations are offered into optimised evolving LC support mechanisms at local, regional and national level; ultimately contributing to rural regional policy development in each domain.

Table of Contents

Declaration.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
Dedication.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
List of Abbreviations.....	x
List of Figures.....	xi
List of Tables.....	xii
List of Exhibits.....	xiv
Glossary of Terms.....	xv
Chapter One Introduction	1
1.0 Chapter overview.....	1
1.1 Research overview.....	2
1.1.1 Exploring learning communities.....	3
1.2 Research rationale and gap.....	6
1.3 Research aim and objectives.....	8
1.4 Thesis outline and structure.....	9
1.5 Research contribution.....	12
Chapter Two The Micro Firm: A Rural Tourism Context	14
2.0 Chapter overview.....	14
2.1 Rural tourism micro firms: A definition.....	15
2.2 Tourism micro firm contribution to the rural economy: An Irish, Welsh and Canadian context.....	17
2.3 Internal characteristics of micro firms: Influence on learning.....	19
2.3.1 Owner/ manager characteristics.....	19
2.3.1.1 Educational background.....	19
2.3.1.2 Motivation and personal goals.....	20
2.3.1.3 Prior business experience.....	21
2.3.2 Owner-led culture.....	21
2.3.3 Micro firm approach to strategy.....	23
2.3.4 Micro firm resource constraints.....	24
2.3.4.1 Time constraints.....	24
2.3.4.2 Financial constraints.....	25
2.3.4.3 Human resource constraints.....	26
2.4 Impact of the external environment on micro firms.....	29
2.5 Rural micro firm learning – emergent themes.....	31
2.6 Conclusion.....	34
Chapter Three The Rural Micro Firm and the Social Learning Process.....	35
3.0 Chapter overview.....	35
3.1 Orientations to learning.....	36
Section 1: Community of Practice perspective.....	39
3.2.1 Situated learning.....	40

3.2.1.1 Legitimate peripheral participation (LPP)	41
3.2.1.2 Expert participation and the emergence of learning brokers	42
3.2.1.3 Learning as a deepening process of participation	43
3.2.2 Practice within a learning community	44
3.2.2.1 Participation and identity and their link to practice	45
3.2.2.2 Identity and trajectory of learning in a community of practice	47
3.2.2.2.1 Newcomers	47
3.2.2.2.2 Learner qualities as a catalyst in the learning trajectory	48
3.2.2.2.3 The role of the learning broker as a boundary spanner	49
3.2.3 Negotiation of meaning	50
3.2.4 Community of practice – Emergent themes	51
Section 2: Community of Practice individual learning-related attributes	54
3.3.1 Learner autonomy	54
3.3.2 Motivation	55
3.3.3 Learning preference of the micro firm owner/ manager	56
3.3.4 Formal and informal dimensions to learning	57
3.4 Relevance of social learning theory in a rural tourism micro firm context	60
3.5 Conclusion	62
Chapter Four Micro Firm Learning Community	64
4.0 Chapter overview	64
4.1 Micro firm learning communities	66
4.1.1 A facilitated learning community	68
4.1.1.1 Brokerage across boundaries	69
4.1.1.2 The learning set concept	72
4.2 Value of collaborative learning to micro firms and regional development	75
4.2.1 Individual benefits to learning community participation	75
4.2.1.1 Development of social needs	76
4.2.1.2 Learner autonomy	78
4.2.2 Community/ regional development benefits of collaboration	78
4.3 Challenges to autonomous learning	80
4.4 Facilitated rural micro firm learning communities: emergent themes	81
4.5 The role of the broker in an independent learning community	84
4.6 Evolving learning community	87
4.6.1 Seeding structures	87
4.6.1.1 Competence development as a seeding structure	88
4.6.2 Shared histories of learning	89
4.6.3 Forms of participation	90
4.6.4 Power dynamics	91
4.7 Boundary interactions	92
4.8 Rural micro firm evolving learning communities: emergent themes	95
4.9 Conceptual learning community model	97
4.10 Conclusion	100
Chapter Five Research Methodology	102
5.0 Chapter overview	102

5.1 Research aim and objectives	103
5.2 Philosophical perspective	105
5.2.1 Ontology	106
5.2.2 Human nature.....	107
5.2.3 Epistemology	107
5.2.4 Methodology	109
5.3 Research method selection.....	111
5.3.1 Action research	113
5.3.2 Ethnography.....	114
5.3.3 Case study research.....	114
5.4 Case study research design	117
5.4.1 Unit of analysis	119
5.4.2 Case study selection.....	119
5.4.3 Case study access.....	121
5.4.3 Case study duration.....	122
5.5 Applied interpretive research techniques.....	123
5.5.1 Semi-structured interviews and informal conversations/ dialogue.....	124
5.5.2 Key informant semi-structured interviews	125
5.5.3 Follow-up and clarification semi-structured interviews	126
5.5.4 Observation	127
5.5.5 Researcher's reflective diary	128
5.5.6 Complementary research techniques	129
5.5.6.1 Documentary analysis.....	129
5.5.6.2 Tourism community contextual analysis	130
5.5.6.3 Community correspondence on social media	130
5.5.7 Measurement of applied learning and learner autonomy technique	131
5.5.7.1 Cross-case analysis	132
5.6 Research value	133
5.7 Data management	135
5.7.1 Crystallisation	136
5.8 Data analysis and interpretation.....	137
5.9 Research legitimisation.....	140
5.9.1 Reliability.....	140
5.9.2 Validity	141
5.9.3 Generalisability	142
5.10 Research considerations.....	143
5.10.1 Representation	144
5.10.2 Ethics	144
5.11 Conclusion	146
Chapter Six Findings.....	148
6.0 Chapter Overview	148
6.1 Researcher engagement with case communities.....	149
6.1.1 Learning Community 1 – Case participants	149
6.1.2 Learning Community 2 – Case participants	151

6.2 Learning community 1 case profile: The location	153
6.2.1 Evolution of tourism services	155
6.2.2 Learning community: Introduction	156
6.2.3 Catalyst for learning community formation.....	158
6.2.4 Structure and leadership.....	161
6.2.5 Participation and identity	164
6.2.5.1 Awareness of responsibility/ contribution	168
6.2.5.2 Learning community membership and boundary	170
6.2.6 Evolution of learning community practice	172
6.2.6.1 Negotiation of practice.....	175
6.2.6.2 Learning community collaboration.....	182
6.2.7 External relationships	185
6.2.7.1 Barriers of engagement with external tourism businesses.....	187
6.2.8 Case summary.....	190
6.3 Learning community 2 case profile: The location	194
6.3.1 Evolution of tourism services	196
6.3.2 Learning community: Introduction	199
6.3.3 Catalyst for learning community formation.....	202
6.3.4 Structure and leadership.....	203
6.3.4 Participation and identity	206
6.3.4.1 Awareness of responsibility/ contribution	209
6.3.4.2 Learning community membership and boundary	213
6.3.5 Evolution of learning community practice	215
6.3.5.1 Learning community collaboration.....	218
6.3.5.2 Negotiating learning community symbols	221
6.3.6 External relationships	226
6.3.6.1 Learning community relationship with the the Local Tourist Organisation.....	228
6.3.7 Case summary.....	232
6.4 Findings summary.....	236
6.5 Conclusion	239
Chapter Seven Discussion	240
7.0 Chapter overview	240
7.1 Catalyst for learning community formation.....	242
7.1.2 Initial learning community management	244
7.2 Learning community configuration	247
7.2.1 Structure and leadership.....	247
7.2.1.1 Contemplating the transition of leadership	250
7.2.1.2 Roles/ responsibilities	253
7.2.1.2.1 Learning community 2: Sub group D	254
7.2.1.3 Membership criteria	255
7.2.1.4 The learning communities' periphery	257
7.2.2 Learning community communication	259
7.3 Learning strategies	262
7.3.1 Learning sets	262

7.3.1.1 Brokering the learning set.....	263
7.3.2 Role of the broker	265
7.3.2.1 Addressing knowledge deficits	265
7.3.2.2 Encouraging reflection on learning community practice.....	267
7.4 Learning community resources.....	270
7.5 Participation and identity	275
7.5.1 Forms of participation - core and peripheral members	275
7.5.1.1 Core member dominance	278
7.5.2 Local tourism broker influence on participation.....	281
7.6 External relationships	284
7.7 Refining the evolving learning community model	290
7.7.1 Interplay between broker support and broker step back to promote autonomy.....	291
7.7.2 Crucial role of communication and resultant negotiation of conflict	292
7.7.3 Boundary interactions	293
7.8 Conclusion	294
Chapter Eight Research Conclusions and Recommendations	297
8.0 Chapter overview	297
8.1 Thesis aim and objectives	298
8.2 Summary of research outcomes	299
8.3 Recommendations.....	308
8.4 Contributions to knowledge.....	315
8.4.1 Theoretical contributions of the research.....	315
8.4.1.1 New areas for description	315
8.4.1.2 Extending/ reinforcing existing theory	316
8.4.2 Practical contributions to knowledge.....	317
8.4.2.1 Proposed rural tourism micro firm evolving learning community model	320
8.4.2.2 Research approach	320
8.4.2.3 Summary	321
8.5 Research limitations.....	322
8.6 Recommendations for future research	324
Reference List.....	325
Appendices.....	347
Appendix A: Case study protocol.....	347
Appendix B: Researcher terms of reference	348
Appendix C: Observation guide	347
Appendix D: NVivo research theme development	349
Appendix E: DestinationNEXT: A strategic road map 2014 scenarios.....	356
Appendix F: Meeting guide workshop number one: Learning community variables	351
Appendix G: Reflections on using NVivo	357

List of Abbreviations

CoP: Community of Practice

O/Ms: Owner/ Managers

LC: Learning Community

OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

SMEs: Small and Medium Sized Enterprises

UK: United Kingdom

FLN: Facilitated Learning Network

LPP: Legitimate Peripheral Participation

LC1: Canadian Learning Community

LC2: Welsh Learning Community

LTO: Local Tourist Organisation

RTO4: Regional Tourism Organisation 4

BIA: Business Improvement Area

EU: European Union

ERDF: European Regional Development Fund

LEADER: Liaison Entre Actions pour le Developement d'Economie Rurale

List of Figures

Figure 1.1: Thesis Outline and Structure.....	9
Figure 3.1: Formal versus Informal Learning.....	58
Figure 4.1: Evolving Learning Community Model.....	98
Figure 5.1: Research Assumptions.....	105
Figure 5.2: Data Analysis Processes.....	137
Figure 6.1: Learning community 1 Structure.....	157
Figure 6.2: Break-out Sessions: Composition of the Groups and Room Layout.....	180
Figure 6.3: Learning Community 2 Structure.....	200
Figure 6.4: Learning Community 2 Structure Refined.....	231
Figure 7.1: Refined Evolving Learning Community Model.....	291

List of Tables

Table 2.1: Micro Firm Internal Characteristics.....	28
Table 2.2: Rural Micro Firm Learning: Emergent Themes.....	32
Table 3.1: Orientations to Learning.....	37
Table 3.2: Community of Practice Indicators.....	40
Table 3.3: Learner Identities within a Community of Practice.....	50
Table 3.4: Community of Practice: Emergent Themes.....	53
Table 3.5: Micro Firm Learning Spaces.....	59
Table 4.1: Facilitated Rural Micro Firm Learning Communities: Emergent Themes.....	82
Table 4.2: Evolving Rural Micro Firm Learning Community: Emergent Themes.....	95
Table 5.1: Case Study Protocol.....	118
Table 5.2: Case Participant Selection Criteria.....	121
Table 5.3: Key Informants.....	126
Table 5.4 Criteria for Judging Qualitative Research.....	140
Table 6.1: Learning Community 1 Case Participants.....	150
Table 6.2: Learning Community 2 Case Participants.....	152
Table 6.3: Support, Denied or Passive Learning and Emerging Autonomy.....	174
Table 6.4: Summary of Learning Community Events.....	175
Table 6.5: Input of Learning Community Members during Self-Assessment Workshop.....	177
Table 6.6: Key Canadian Case Findings.....	192

Table 6.7: Defining Learning Community 2.....	200
Table 6.8: Key Welsh Findings.....	234
Table 6.9: Summary Findings: Canadian and Welsh Case Communities.....	237
Table 7.1: Learning Community Catalyst Influencing Learner Autonomy.....	246
Table 7.2: Learning Community Impact on Micro Firm Learner Autonomy.....	268
Table 7.3: Influence of Resource Negotiation on Learner Autonomy.....	274
Table 7.4: Participation and Identity: Influence on Learner Autonomy.....	283
Table 7.5: External Relationships Influencing Learner Autonomy.....	287
Table 7.6: Summary of Discussion Points.....	288

List of Exhibits

Exhibit 6.1: Detailing the Background and Evolution of DestinationNEXT.....	158
Exhibit 6.2: Defining the Structure.....	163
Exhibit 6.3: Project Overview.....	167
Exhibit 6.4: Asset Mapping Session: Principles for Success.....	178
Exhibit 6.5: The Evolution of Voluntary Groups (2003-2016).....	197
Exhibit 6.6: Deliberating Sub Group D Activities.....	217
Exhibit 6.7: Closure of the Bank and Cash Machine Services.....	227
Exhibit 6.8: ‘Buy local’ Scheme.....	230

Glossary of Terms

Artefacts: A term that refers to tools that facilitate understanding in a community context (Valkering et al., 2013; Wenger, 1998). For example, artefacts can include but are not limited to documents, stories or rules which learning community (LC) members can draw meaning from.

Broker: A broker is an individual who arranges or negotiates (an agreement) between parties. Two broker types are of value in this study, the knowledge broker and the learning broker, see below for both definitions.

Broker support: An individual that supports leadership capacity as LC goals and roles are negotiated (Wenger, 1998).

Boundary spanner: An individual that seeks out and leverages external expertise at and beyond the borders of a learning community (Wenger, 1998). They nurture relationships between learning community members and external agents in pursuit of filling community knowledge gaps and seeking new opportunities for practice.

Close others: Devins et al. (2005) refers to ‘close others’ as relationships with family or friends. In a rural context these are the predominant relationship types drawn on for learning in practice (Getz and Carlsen, 2005; McAreavey and McDonagh, 2011; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Siemens, 2010).

Collaborative strategy: Refers to individuals coming together in a learning community context to negotiate ideas in the pursuit of a common goal (Wenger, 1998) regardless of a tacit or implicit learning focus.

Community of Practice (CoP): Emerged from Lave and Wenger’s (1991) seminal work where they viewed learning as individuals engaging in a community of practice. Working at the periphery initially, the ‘newcomer’ gradually adopts the routines and practices of the community, eventually developing their identity as a full member (which Lave and Wenger term ‘legitimate peripheral participation’) alongside ‘old-timers’.

Coopetition: In a tourism context, coopetition relates to businesses working mutually together through a combination of individual competition and collective collaboration (Tinsley and Lynch, 2007).

Denied learning: Occurs when LC members cannot engage in the negotiation of meaning when broker/ leader support is too strong, which will curtail the development of learner competence (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Evolving learning community (ELC): An addition to the learning community definition provided below which acknowledges evolution ‘as the community evolves from one stage to another i.e. from a facilitated to an independent context or vice versa’.

Facilitated learning community (FLC): A formal environment with a dedicated broker that promotes the development of effective social relationships amongst members through the utilisation of collaborative strategies (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Jämsä et al., 2011; Valkering et al., 2013). These can be education/ academe-led learning networks (Florén and Tell, 2004; Halme, 2001; Morrison et al., 2004; Foley et al., 2006) or tourism support organisation-led networks (Beaumont and Dredge, 2010; Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003).

Independent learning community (ILC): Is defined as a group of businesses (micro firms in this study) who collaborate with one another and other rural tourism development stakeholders in their community for the purpose of tourism development and in doing so they build shared meaning and learn in practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Individual learning: Learning that occurs as individuals participate in and/ or engage with a community of practice (CoP).

Intelligent participation: This term refers to the individual’s competence as a learner to be able to participate in and/ or engage with a community of practice (CoP).

Knowledge broker: Is a key individual that ‘*champion[s] the ‘public good serving...various interests...beyond the commercial sphere’* (Lemmetyinen and Go, 2009: 31) and tends to have a primarily action/ knowledge exchanged focus reflecting the project or activity emphasis that guides their learning community role/ involvement. However, regardless of this implicit learning focus the underlying ethos of the approach adopted by the knowledge broker in brokering a learning community will be to encourage the development of social relationships amongst members in the pursuit of sustaining an autonomous learning community.

LEADER: Liaison Entre Actions pour le Development d'Economie Rurale refers to a rural development programme set up by the European government to support rural activities and quality of life in rural areas.

Learning: This study draws on the community of practice (CoP) perspective as the theoretical baseline where learning occurs as individuals engage in a CoP. It refers to more than developing individual practice but also involves reinterpreting and reshaping resources that are developed by and belong to the wider community (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Handley et al., 2006).

Learner autonomy: In the context of this study, an individual demonstrates learner autonomy as they become more involved in practice and in doing so they negotiate, reinterpret and reshape resources (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). They begin to take ownership of their learning.

Learning broker: Is a key individual that promotes collaborative learning relationships and reflection amongst members (Garavan et al., 2007; Kelliher and Reint, 2011; Lave and Wenger, 1991) and therefore will have an explicit learning focus. In doing this the learning broker supports the development of social bonds amongst learning community members and hence contributes to the sustainability of an autonomous LC.

Learning community (LC): A LC is an environment where learning occurs through the pursuit of collaborative practice. Numerous LCs exist in the tourism literature including learning networks, business networks and informal networks. These LCs can be facilitated or unfacilitated and have an intentional or unintentional learning focus. The LCs relevant to this study includes the micro firm, facilitated and evolving LC environments.

Learning network: Is defined as '*a network formally set up for the primary purpose of increasing knowledge*' (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001: 88) and can be facilitated or unfacilitated.

Learning set: Comprise of six-eight members (micro firms/ other rural tourism development stakeholders) and acts as a social space where members can interact and share ideas/ resources (Devins et al., 2005). The objective of the learning set will differ and depend on the predominant focus (practice versus learning) of the individual who brokers the set. The focus and configuration of the learning set will determine its value to members regardless of the implicit/ explicit learning focus.

Learning strategy: Enables learning amongst learning community members even where learning is not intentional. Therefore the learning set (see definition above) can function as an unintentional learning strategy, even if the learning focus is implicit.

Legitimate peripheral participation: A term used by Lave and Wenger (1991) to refer to an individual's (newcomer's) learning development as they move from the periphery of a community to the centre of practice.

Meaning: Refers to making sense of reality by interpreting the construction of shared meanings shared by that social group (Brannick and Roche, 1997).

Micro firm: A micro firm is defined as an organisation employing zero to nine employees (Greenbank, 2000; Lawless et al., 2000; Matlay, 1999; O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014) for the purposes of this study, regardless of differences in definition dependent on studied country criteria.

Micro firm learning community: Is defined as '*a socially constructed learning environment that enhances individual learning and business development through cooperative learning strategies that facilitate learning relationship development, resource sharing and learner autonomy*' (Reinl and Kelliher, 2010: 142).

Network (verb): To *network* is to mobilise relationships and learn from other members of the network (Lynch and Morrison, 2007).

Networks: Fuller-Love and Thomas (2004) and Morrison et al. (2004) refer to networks as voluntary arrangements amongst organisations. The aim is coopetition (see definition above) as opposed to competition.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD): A platform where member countries can discuss problems facing the world's economy and jointly develop policies to solve them.

Passive learning: Occurs when the leader/ broker of a LC adopts a instructional leadership style. LC members simply consume knowledge to the detriment of learner autonomy.

Reification: In simple terms, reification is a way of making an abstract and concise representation of what is often a complex and frequently messy practice, thus making it easier to share within the community (Wenger, 1998).

Resource poverty: Term refers to the resource constrained environment that micro firm owner/ managers operate in.

Rural: Relating to, or characteristic of the countryside rather than the town (Oxford Dictionary, 2016). Deemed to be situated some distance from urban centres, has a low population density and its' economic/ industry base is heavily dependent on agriculture and natural resources (Deavers, 1992; OECD¹, 2006; Reinl et al., 2015; Siemens, 2015).

Rural tourism business: Various criteria can be used to define a rural tourism business including but not limited to distance from urban centres, economic opportunities available to them and the composition of their economic base (Deavers, 1992; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003).

Tourism: the activity of travelling or visiting a place for pleasure (Oxford Dictionary, 2016).

Tourism provider: the business of providing products and services to those who travel or visit a place for pleasure (adapted from the Oxford Dictionary, 2016).

Tourist: A person who is travelling or visiting a place for pleasure (Oxford Dictionary, 2016).

Trajectory of learning: Refers to the journey learning community (LC) members embark on in pursuit of taking ownership of their learning. The identity of the individual (for example a newcomer) will influence their trajectory of learning to the centre of LC practice as a certain degree of legitimacy is required to become involved at a deeper level in practice over time.

¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

Chapter One

Introduction

1.0 Chapter overview

This research seeks to explore the elements and relationships that influence learning in evolving learning communities (LCs) in the micro firm rural tourism context. The chapter begins by locating this research within the micro firm LC literature and relevant research gaps in the area are highlighted. Following this, the rationale for conducting the research is provided. The research aim and objectives are articulated and the structure of the thesis is presented. Finally, the research contributions of this study are outlined.

1.1 Research overview

For the purposes of this study, a micro firm is defined as an organisation that employs zero to nine employees (European Commission, 2014). This definition is consistent with the tourism literature (Chell and Baines, 2000; Greenbank, 2000; Lawless et al., 2000; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Schaper et al., 2005), while tourism is the business of providing products and services to those who travel or visit a place for pleasure (adapted from the Oxford Dictionary, 2016). The tourism sector is the third largest economic contributor to the European Union (European Commission, 2014) and this sector is dominated by micro firms. Of particular interest to this study, micro firms represent approximately 90 per cent of businesses in Ireland (Central Statistics Office, 2011), 91 per cent in Wales (Welsh Government, 2015) and 98 per cent in Canada (Industry Canada, 2013) all of which are predominantly rural and operate in the tourism sector (von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003).

Rural relates to, or is characteristic of the countryside rather than the town (Oxford Dictionary, 2016) and the above definition of tourism is upheld in this environment. Rural economies are reliant on micro firms in the main, to facilitate economic growth, competitiveness and employment (Komppula, 2004; Perren, 1999; Phillipson et al., 2004; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014) of which the tourism sector is particularly contributory. Various criteria can be used to define a rural tourism business including but not limited to distance from urban centres, economic opportunities available to them and the composition of their economic base (Deavers, 1992; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003). Rural tourism micro firm owner/ managers (O/Ms) face a number of challenges with regard to development for example, poor labour availability and infrastructure and difficulty in accessing expert knowledge; collectively referred to as resource. In order to overcome these challenges O/Ms '*draw on locally available resources such as themselves, their family, business or community*' (Siemens, 2010: 65). In this way micro firms make a business work by experiencing everyday relationships with others, and it is in this social context that learning and development occurs (Devins et al. 2005; Lave and Wenger, 1991). Social learning theory has particular relevance in a tourism context (Shaw and Williams, 2009) and has been previously utilised in a rural micro firm tourism context (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). Thus, by engaging in collaborative learning and practice with other tourism/

business development stakeholders, rural tourism micro firms can potentially overcome barriers to sustainable development that have arisen partially due to their isolated nature and the resource constraints they might face (Tinsley and Lynch, 2007; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003).

1.1.1 Exploring learning communities in the micro firm rural tourism context

The environment where learning occurs through the pursuit of collaborative practice is referred to as a LC. The LCs relevant to this study includes those relating to rural tourism micro firms. As a number of different LC approaches to collaboration in tourism exist, it is important to note that the focus and learning outcomes of each approach will vary from one to the other. LCs can emerge under a facilitated LC catalyst or organically from within the rural tourism LC itself (titled an independent LC). Either approach can result in an evolving LC.

A facilitated LC is a formal environment, which has structured components and an intentional focus. In this environment, the network literature features knowledge brokers in academe-led networks (Florén and Tell, 2004; Morrison et al., 2004; Halme, 2001; among others) and/ or tourism support organisation-led networks (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Beaumont and Dredge, 2010; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003). In a facilitated LC, a learning set, normally comprising six-eight members (micro firms/ other rural tourism development stakeholders) may act as a social space where members can interact and share ideas/ resources (Devins et al., 2005). The objective of the learning set will differ and depend on the predominant focus (practice versus learning) of the individual who brokers the set while the focus and configuration of the learning set will determine its value to members regardless of the implicit/ explicit learning focus. The configuration of the facilitation actor (academe/ tourism support organisation) will also influence facilitated LC collaboration. For example, a LC supported by a tourism support organisation may be more knowledge/ action exchange focused with little attention paid to learning, which raises questions with regard to the sustainability of an autonomous LC once facilitation ends. Thus, the learning focus, the role of the broker and the learning set as a social

structure of learning in the facilitated environment are important factors in strengthening social bonds amongst members (Jämsä et al., 2011). Without these bonds, the transition from facilitated collaborative learning to independent LCs can be challenging in a rural tourism micro firm context. It is clear from the above that certain facilitated strategies and the level and type of broker engagement supports or impedes the evolution of an independent LC. This research pays particular attention to these support strategies and the role of the broker and how they might evolve in a community without facilitated support, or when it ends.

An independent LC is an informal environment that may have an unintentional learning focus and is defined as;

a group of businesses (micro firms in this case) who collaborate with one another and other rural tourism development stakeholders in their community for the purpose of tourism development and in doing so they build shared meaning and learn in practice' (adapted from Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

This definition can be extended to represent an evolving LC by adding the caveat; *'as the community evolves from one stage of evolution to another i.e. facilitated to independent or vice versa'* (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014: 118). Sustaining learning in an evolving LC dominated by rural tourism micro firms is likely to be challenging given the dynamics of how rural micro firms learn independently and together (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). In this context, various characteristics will influence the evolution of the rural tourism micro firm LC over time which includes the catalyst for LC formation, structure and leadership, learning strategies, the micro firm O/Ms motivation to engage with and participate in the LC and boundary interactions.

The study of evolving LCs emerges from Lave and Wenger's (1991) seminal work where learning occurs as individuals engage in a community of practice (CoP). Working at the periphery initially, the 'newcomer' gradually adopts the routines and practices of the community, eventually developing their identity as a full member (which Lave and Wenger term 'legitimate peripheral participation'). These peripheral participants work alongside 'old-timers' within the community. This approach has recently been used in a

rural tourism micro firm LC study carried out in Ireland (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014) and allows the researcher to understand the dynamic learning relationships between micro firm O/Ms and the collaborative learning context in which they practice and learn (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Halinen and Törnroos, 2005; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). Drawing from Lave and Wenger's (1991) CoP perspective, the following section provides the rationale for conducting this research.

1.2 Research rationale and gap

Micro firms learn uniquely both individually and in a community setting (O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000; Kelliher and Reinl, 2010). With regard to community-based learning, Reinl and Kelliher (2014) and Devins et al. (2005) argue that there is an absence of studies specifically relating to micro firm learning interactions with other micro tourism firms. A number of studies demonstrate the need for and value of collaborative learning networks for micro firms (Ahlström –Söderling, 2003; Gibson and Lynch, 2007; Morrison et al., 2004; Fuller-Love and Thomas, 2004; Ahmad, 2005; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007) and specifically in a rural context (Halme, 2001; Pavlovich, 2003; Reinl and Kelliher, 2010).

As the tourism sector is dominated by micro firms, which are predominantly rural, researchers and policy makers have become increasingly interested in the ethos of using tourism as an impetus for regional development in rural areas (Brouder and Eriksson, 2013; McAreavey and McDonagh, 2011; OECD, 2010). Micro firm development is the mechanism behind rural tourism development (Irvine and Anderson, 2004; McAreavey and McDonagh, 2011) of which sustainable rural tourism is believed to be a key component. The latter study (McAreavey and McDonagh, 2011) sees sustainable tourism as socially constructed and dynamic as it is '*constantly being constructed and reconstructed by different stakeholders*' (p. 177). Therefore, for sustainable development to occur all stakeholders need to actively contribute and participate in the tourism community (Halme, 2001) to ensure '*democratic empowerment and equity, operational advantages and [an] enhanced tourism product*' (Heidari et al., 2014: 268). However, growth expectations will depend on what motivates rural micro firm O/Ms. If their preference is for a subsistence/ lifestyle business rather than growth focused, as is often the case in this setting (Crick, 2011; Meccheri and Pelloni, 2006; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004), their potential economic contribution will be inhibited (Devins et al., 2005).

In considering the above, as a collaborative 'LC' ethos becomes embedded amongst individuals, shared meaning is developed from learning together in practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This CoP perspective gives researchers a lens through which to look at an

individual's learning and identity development as they participate in a LC. The CoP perspective is particularly fitting in a rural tourism micro firm context as micro firm O/Ms learning develops as they participate in social practice and interact with other tourism/ rural development stakeholders (Kelliher and Reinl, 2011, 2014; Komppula, 2004; Morrison et al., 2004; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Pavlovich, 2003; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007).

While rural stakeholder collaborations are considered pivotal to successful rural development (Pavlovich, 2003) little research focuses on how micro firm communities learn independently together in a rural tourism context over time. Furthermore, there is a clear research gap focusing on community-oriented learning interactions amongst rural tourism micro firms to date, specifically in an evolving LC context (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). Despite calls to study micro firm learning (Devins et al., 2005; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009; Meccheri and Pelloni, 2006), particularly in the tourism sector (Komppula, 2014), there has been limited research focusing on micro firm learning. This study aims to contribute to this research gap by enhancing knowledge in the rural tourism micro firm LC domain.

To summarise, while research focusing on different LC approaches in various contexts has been growing, to best of the researcher's knowledge no study to date has considered the elements and relationships that influence learning in an evolving rural tourism practitioner community. Furthermore, the researcher found no evidence of multi-country studies focused on this research topic, therefore the proposal is to study this phenomenon in a Canadian and Welsh context, using a recent Irish study (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014) as a baseline for comparative purposes.

1.3 Research aim and objectives

While previous research has demonstrated the value of facilitated strategies in supporting micro firm learner autonomy (Halme, 2001; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Morrison et al., 2004; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014), this multi-country study explores facilitated strategies and how they evolve in a setting independent of focused network support.

The research objectives are:

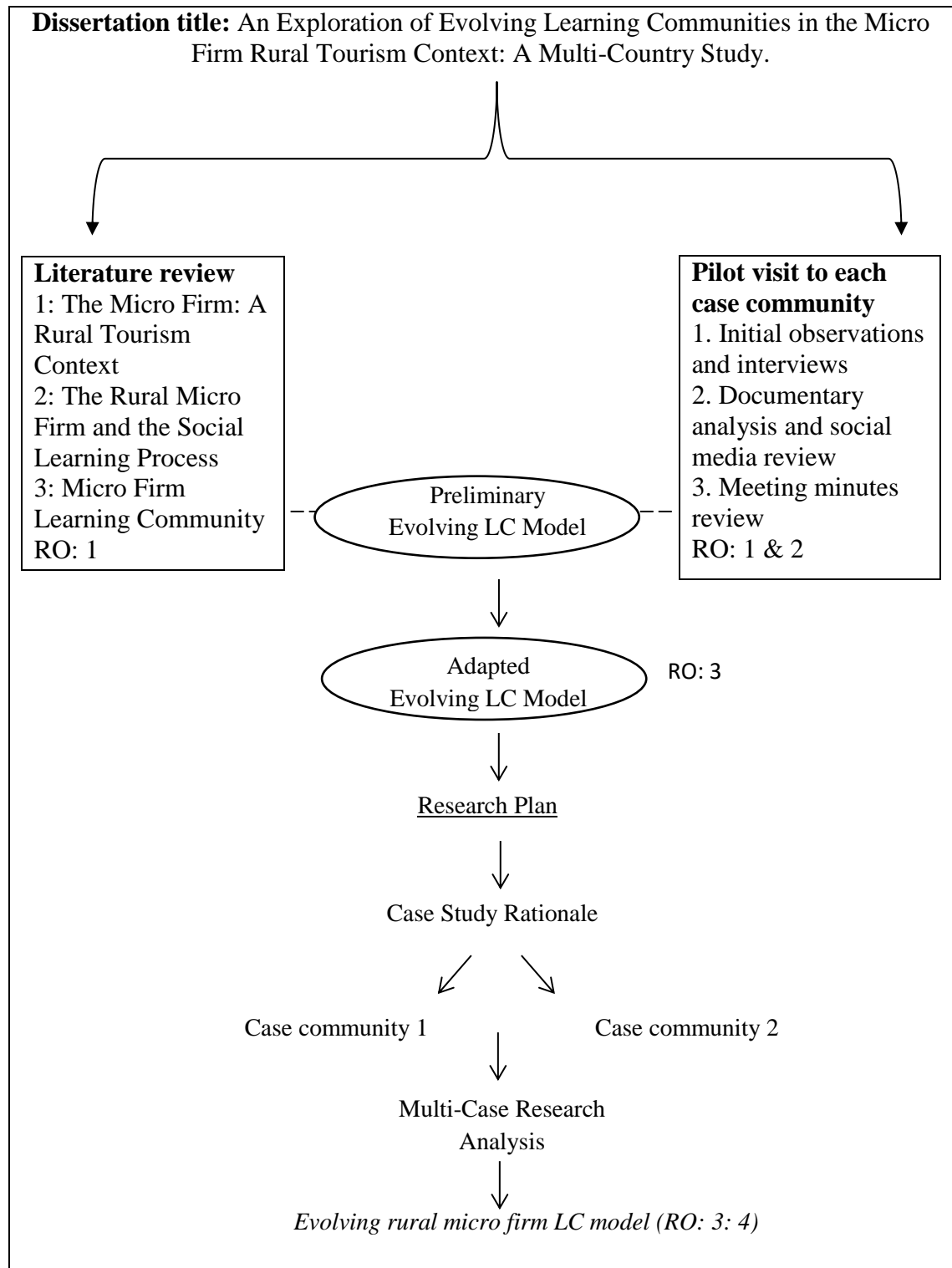
1. To study the elements and relationships that influence learning in a micro firm rural tourism community in Canada and Wales;
2. To map the elements and relationships which support or impede learner autonomy within these evolving learning communities;
3. To develop an evolving learning community model for use in rural micro firm tourism communities, based on the multi-country findings;
4. To consider the theory and practice implications of the study.

The overall research aim of this study is: *to explore the elements and relationships that influence learning in evolving learning communities in the micro firm rural tourism context.*

1.4 Thesis outline and structure

Figure 1.1 below illustrates the research process adopted in this study.

Figure 1.1: Thesis Outline and Structure



The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows;

The literature review comprises three chapters. Chapter two details the micro firm in a rural tourism context and explores the internal and external influences on micro firm O/M learning. A conceptualisation of emergent themes relating to rural micro firm learning is presented. The theoretical base of this study is examined in chapter three. This chapter begins by outlining the various learning perspectives and their impact on individual learning. Following this, social learning theory and in particular Lave and Wenger's (1991) and Wenger's (1998) CoP perspective is outlined. The core concepts of the CoP perspective are explored first and emergent themes are tabulated. This is followed by an examination of individual attributes that influence learning and participation in a CoP. The link between the CoP perspective and rural tourism micro firm learning is then addressed. Chapter four examines a number of micro firm LCs that are exhibited in the micro firm learning and networks literature. The characteristics of a micro firm LC are outlined and the facilitated LC concept is explored. The transition of a micro firm LC from one stage to the next (for example facilitation to independent) can be difficult in a micro firm setting due to the inward focus of this cohort, and therefore the challenges relating to the pursuit of autonomous learning are outlined. The remainder of this chapter focuses on the sustainability of an evolving LC and facilitated strategies are referred to with regard to how they evolve in a setting that does not have focused network support. A tabulation of literature-led emergent themes is presented prior to establishing a conceptual rural micro firm evolving LC model that illustrates the elements and relationships that influence learning in this environment.

Chapter five outlines the research design adopted in this study. Numerous philosophical positions are examined prior to selecting the research method. After discounting alternative research methods the multi-case interpretive approach is deemed optimal. Once the case study approach is outlined, the data collection techniques utilised in this study are detailed. Data management and research legitimisation are explored prior to research considerations being noted.

The findings from the Canadian and Welsh case communities are presented in chapter six and interpreted and discussed in chapter seven. Each case begins with a profile of the LC location. Similarities and differences between the two cases are highlighted and discussed throughout chapter seven in relation to the research themes: catalyst for LC formation, structure and leadership, learning strategies, LC resources, communication, participation and identity and external relationships. Based on these findings the elements and relationships that influence learning are incorporated into the refined evolving LC model which are then discussed in detail.

Key research outcomes are detailed in chapter eight. Research contributions to theory and practice are outlined based on these outcomes. Research limitations are acknowledged and recommendations are made for future research and practice.

1.5 Research contribution

From a literary perspective, this research aims to contribute to the domains of tourism micro firm collaborative activities, rural communities, social learning and community of practice theories and the emerging concept of evolving LCs. Through engaging with the literary gaps identified in section 1.1 and 1.2 above, the researcher seeks to enhance knowledge in these domains. This research makes a significant theoretical contribution by providing a deeper understanding of the elements and relationships within evolving LCs and how they influence learner autonomy (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). The development of an evolving LC model for rural micro firm tourism based on the Canadian and Welsh experience add to this research base. There is limited knowledge in relation to evolving LCs in rural areas particularly in an international context. For example, little is known about how the catalyst, structure and leadership, learning strategies, LC resources, communication, participation and identity and boundary criteria support or impede micro firm learner autonomy and influence the evolving LC's learning dynamic. It is clear from both cases that facilitation/ learning support is required initially in a rural tourism micro firm LC, as divergent motivations and perspectives of members need to be overcome if learner autonomy and LC sustainability is to be enhanced. This supports the view of others in a rural tourism development context (McAreevey and McDonagh, 2011; Waligo et al., 2011).

On a practical level, building on previous research in the area (Reinl, 2011; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014), the evolving LC model provides brokers/ leaders, local governments and facilitators (for example academic or tourism support organisations) with an interactive education tool to help balance stakeholder self-direction with learner support, which is vital for sustainable LC evolution (Jack et al., 2010; Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Lemmetyinen and Go, 2009; Marsden et al., 2010). A further contribution is that the research provides insight to those practitioners involved in learning and development initiatives in rural tourism micro firm communities. The rural tourism micro firms may also gain from an increased awareness of the elements and relationships inherent in an evolving LC.

From a policy perspective, this research provides insight into the evolutionary dynamics of rural micro tourism LCs and therefore it has the potential to influence the tourism education sector's training and learning strategies and resultant continuing professional development policy in each context (Wales and Canada). Specifically, policy makers need to better understand that learning within evolving LCs is influenced by context specific criteria. Considering the significant contribution tourism micro firms make to their respective rural economies, evolving LC insights can help to optimise government training and support policies in these domains.

Chapter Two

The Micro Firm: A Rural Tourism Context

2.0 Chapter overview

Research has confirmed that micro firms differ from large firms with regard to how they are motivated to grow and develop their business (Garavan et al., 2007; Greenbank, 2000; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Phillipson et al., 2004; Reijonen and Komppula, 2007; Schaper et al., 2005). Findings also highlight that micro firms may lack the resources necessary for learning and business development to occur (Devins et al., 2005; Phillipson et al., 2004; Raley and Moxey, 2000). There are fundamental differences between micro and large firms, in relation to learning (Devins et al., 2005; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009; O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000) and collaboration (Ahmad, 2005; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007). Therefore, policy formulated for large organisations will not effectively connect with micro firm owner/ managers (O/Ms), as their learning preferences are heterogenic (Devins et al., 2005; Jaouen and Lasch, 2015). As such they learn differently to their larger counterparts, both on an individual and collective basis (Kelliher and Reinl, 2011).

This chapter commences with a micro firm definition; provided from a European, Canadian and Welsh perspective. Following a brief overview of Irish, Canadian and Welsh micro firm performance in relation to rural business development; internal characteristics and external influences on micro firm O/M learning are explored.

2.1 Rural tourism micro firms: A definition

The micro firm literature has noted that the size of these enterprises can be established in a number of different ways for example: financial turnover, size or number of employees (Devins et al., 2005; Greenbank, 2000). However, it is generally accepted that micro firms employ zero to nine employees (Greenbank, 2000; Kearney et al., 2014; Lawless et al., 2000; Matlay, 1999; O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). This definition is supported in the tourism literature (Chell and Baines, 2000; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Schaper et al., 2005) and is consistent from a European perspective (European Commission, 2005; 2013). Welsh enterprises are also deemed micro businesses if they employ between zero to nine employees (Micro-business Task and Finish Group Report, 2012), a definition which is consistent with the rest of the UK (Parliament UK, 2012) and Ireland, while Canadian micro firms are defined as having one to four paid employees (Industry Canada, 2013). For the purpose of this research a micro firm by definition will employ less than 10 employees. Throughout this research the term micro firm will be used when referring to academic literature referring to 'small business' but equating to organisations with less than 10 employees based on the employee profile of studied firms, as it can be assumed to relate to micro firms despite the different label of such an organisation.

Although Polo and Frías (2010) and Stathopoulou et al. (2004) note that it can be difficult to define a rural area as it is subject to various interpretations and criteria such as population density, economic opportunities and so on, it is generally accepted that an area is deemed rural if it is situated some distance from urban centres, has a low population density and its economic/ industry base is heavily dependent on agriculture and natural resources (Deavers, 1992; OECD², 2006; Reinl et al., 2015; Siemens, 2015). Micro firms are the predominant providers of tourism services in rural regions and they operate in spatial fixity away from centres of activity where their economic base tends to be specialised (von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003). Numerous authors have referred to the importance of micro firms to rural areas (Alonso and Bressan, 2014; Fuller-love and

² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

Thomas, 2004; Meccheri and Pelloni, 2006; Polo and Frías, 2010; Reinl et al., 2015; Siemens, 2015; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003).

As highlighted in chapter one, rural economies are reliant on micro firms, in the main, to facilitate economic growth, competitiveness and employment (Komppula, 2004; Perren, 1999; Phillipson et al., 2004) and tourism is a primary economic activity in these areas. Micro firm development is the mechanism behind rural tourism development as this cohort facilitates economic and social benefits to the host communities they reside and operate in through the inflow of financial resources from tourists and in turn, the establishment of new small enterprises and employment (Robert and Hall, 2004). Under this auspice, there is increasing interest in using tourism as an impetus for rural regional development (Brouder and Eriksson, 2013; McAreavey and McDonagh, 2011). This is evident in Ireland, Wales and Canada as their governments have introduced various projects and initiatives to support tourism in rural areas. These projects and initiatives include Ireland's 9 per cent reduced VAT rate³ in the tourism sector, Wales' Partnership for Growth: Strategy for Tourism 2013-2020⁴ and Canada's Federal Tourism Strategy⁵.

³ A reduced value added tax (VAT) rate of 9% was introduced by the Irish Government on the 1st July 2011, and has been extended indefinitely.

⁴ A tourism strategy developed by the Welsh government in conjunction with a tourism sector panel that was established by the ministry. The overall aim of the strategy is to grow tourism by 10 per cent or more by 2020.

⁵ A tourism strategy developed by the government of Canada that aims to support the tourism sector and to ensure that it can continue to contribute to the Canadian economy.

2.2 Tourism micro firm contribution to the rural economy: An Irish, Welsh and Canadian context

According to the annual report on European small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) 2012/ 2013 conducted by the European Commission (2013), employment created by micro enterprises was approximately 28.7 per cent in 2012, which was just under a third of the total employment figure in the European Union (EU). The report highlights the difficulties micro enterprises faced in 2011 and 2012, where total employment fell by 387,250 in 2012. Furthermore, the 2013 report notes that the net growth of micro enterprises was unstable in the EU in preceding years. Between 2009 and 2010 the number of micro firms increased and the net growth rose to one million units; falling by 200,000 units in 2011, and continuing to decline in 2012 but at a slower rate.

In 2009, Ireland had approximately 177,669 micro enterprises, while in the accommodation and food sector 80.8 per cent were active micro enterprises (The Voice of Small Business Report, 2011). Irish tourism micro firms provide employment opportunities in rural locations (O'Connor et al., 2004) and spin off developments provide additional sources of local employment in these locations. It is noteworthy that Ireland along with the majority of the developed nations faced an extended economic downturn during the period 2008 to 2010, following the global financial crisis of 2008, as reflected in the EU wide SME report statistics, outlined in paragraph one.

In 2011, 94.5 per cent of active Welsh enterprises were micro businesses (Micro-Business Task and Finish Group Report, 2012), which is just less than overall UK enterprise statistics where 96 per cent were regarded as micro firms (Parliament UK, 2012). In Wales, micro enterprises are responsible for 33.2 per cent of private sector employment, hence their importance to the Welsh economy (Micro-Business Task and Finish Group Report, 2012). However, since 2007, the report states that the growth of micro firms in Wales has declined in comparison to the remainder of the UK. This is reflected in the fact that employment in Welsh micro firms fell by one per cent in 2010, whereas in the UK, the employment rate in micro firms remained unchanged. Rural tourism in Wales is vital to the economy as *'rural counties account for some 62 per cent of Wales'* overall visitor

economy (National Assembly for Wales, 2011: 5). This democratically elected body highlights that micro firms in rural Wales keep communities together as tourism to the area stimulates employment.

As of December 2012, small businesses made up 98.2 per cent of employer businesses in Canada (Industry Canada, 2013). According to Industry Canada (2012), in the third quarter of 2009, micro businesses were the main source of job creation in Canada, creating 16,000 jobs. This is a reflection of the importance of micro firms to the growth and development of the Canadian economy (Gill and Biger, 2012). Employment in tourism firms in Canada accounted for 490,000 jobs in rural regions in 2003 (Beshiri, 2005).

2.3 Internal characteristics of micro firms: Influence on learning

The following section will examine internal micro firm criteria that influence learning, these include; the O/M characteristics and their influence on organisational culture, the micro firm approach to strategy and the impact of resource constraints in a micro firm setting.

2.3.1 Owner/ manager characteristics

It has been well documented in the micro firm literature that micro firm O/Ms are heterogenic in terms of their business motivations (Chell and Baines, 2000; Lynch, 1998; Jaouen and Lasch, 2015) and that the scope of their managerial function is quite wide (Florén, 2003; Florén and Tell, 2004; Lawless et al., 2000; Schaper et al., 2005). Heterogeneity is further amplified in a rural tourism context as O/Ms of micro firms in peripheral areas have varying characteristics, which influence learning (Polo and Frías, 2010; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003). These characteristics include but are not limited to; educational background, motivation/ personal goals and prior business experience.

2.3.1.1 Educational background

Over a decade ago Morrison and Teixeira (2004) identified a tourism micro firm O/M as someone who may illustrate limited formal education, ambitions and visions. More recent research has demonstrated that tourism micro firm O/Ms believe practical experience is superior to formal education when starting a business in the tourism sector (Brouder and Eriksson, 2013; Meccheri and Pelloni, 2006). However, if the O/M is highly qualified, this will contribute to their learning development (Sohal et al., 2001) and the development of the business as a whole (Kelliher and Reinl, 2009; Polo and Frías, 2010). If an O/M does not have the ability to recognise and reflect on a past mistake, and the aptitude to apply that learning to a future problem, this can impact negatively on the survival of the business (Giroux, 2009). In addition, Florén (2003) argues that in order for O/Ms to be effective they need to have the ability to interpret events in and outside their business as the learning

needs in micro firms can be hard to establish (Down, 1999). Thus, it is important that an O/M of a micro business has the skill/ capability to undertake reflective practice and engage in problem solving beyond the confines of their own firms and immediate communities in order for learning to occur.

2.3.1.2 Motivation and personal goals

The motivations and individual values of the micro firm O/M will not only affect their commitment to the business and influence the way they communicate and behave (von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003) but will also have a bearing on the financial success of the business (Reijonen and Komppula, 2007). Rural O/Ms will have varying goals; some are attracted to a rural area by local conditions, and some are attracted by the prospect of a better standard of living (Mottiar, 2007; Stathopoulou et al., 2004). For example, if the goals of the O/M are motivated by family, expectations of growth are less likely to apply (Getz and Carlsen, 2005; McAreavey and McDonagh, 2011; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004). Siemens (2010) agrees, finding that rural O/Ms see their business as a means to meet non-monetary goals, such as the ability to stay within the community and to create employment for themselves and others in the community. This is consistent with Morrison and Teixeira's (2004) conclusions which deny the 'death of the lifestyle' traditionally associated with the ownership of small tourism firms, illustrating that *'motivations such as family, lifestyle, rejection of the corporate way of life and the general pursuit of a work/life balance'* (p. 172) propelled O/M's of micro-businesses to reorganise their enterprises to satisfy personal goals (Marchant and Mottiar, 2010).

In order to be successful, micro firm O/Ms need to be pro-active about developing their expertise and partially rely on social relationships (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Taylor and Thorpe, 2004; Wenger, 1998) to achieve this. The motivation or personal goals of the O/M will have an important bearing on their interactions in that pursuit (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004). This is particularly the case in a rural tourism context (McAreavey and McDonagh, 2011; Reijonen and Komppula, 2007; Timur and Getz, 2008). Thus, these divergent goals will influence the way that O/Ms participate in learning communities (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014).

2.3.1.3 Prior business experience

It has been acknowledged in the literature that the past experience of the micro firm O/M can be a trigger of learning (Brouder and Eriksson, 2013; Halme, 2001; Jämsä et al., 2011; Meccheri and Pelloni, 2006). As O/Ms seek to avoid mistakes previously made (O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000) they may have a better chance of survival, a finding that is consistent in a rural context (Meccheri and Pelloni, 2006). In addition, Jämsä et al. (2011) believe that such tacit or informal knowledge gained through prior experience can assist O/Ms of micro firms to notice and be willing to solve problems that they may face. However, Álvarez-Herranz et al. (2011) argue that over time as knowledge increases, the O/M loses the ability to recognise opportunities, such as gathering up-to-date knowledge and the preference to avoid risk. Additionally, as noted previously, micro firm O/Ms hold business knowledge implicitly and therefore learning moments may not be known until they are experienced (Halme, 2001).

Further, significant knowledge may already be present in the micro firm; and while previous experience/ knowledge can enhance the capacity of the micro firm O/M in exploiting external knowledge, Kelliher and Reinl (2009) contend that external impulses, for example a new regulation or increased competition, may be required to trigger internal development, and fuel a learning dynamic within the firm. Tzschentke et al. (2008) note that as the O/M is the central decision maker in the micro firm, their personal values and motivations will determine the businesses reaction to external triggers and if the preference is for a lifestyle as opposed to growth, business learning will be curtailed in the micro firm.

2.3.2 Owner-led culture

Culture is a collection of beliefs, norms and values that are shared by individuals (Trice and Beyer, 1993). These norms and values shape the way an organisation's members behave (Hill and Jones, 1998). Devins et al. (2005) argue micro firm O/Ms have an essential role to play in their culture, which to a large extent is influenced by the O/Ms personality (Kelliher and Reinl, 2009; Tzschentke et al., 2008). This view is further

supported by Greenbank (2000), who indicated that the motivations, attitudes, values and abilities of the O/M are reflected in the micro firm's culture. Greenbank also found that the attitude of the micro firm O/M will dictate whether the micro firm is 'open' or 'closed' to learning and development.

The limited availability of resources in the micro firm environment (Alonso and Bressan, 2014; Devins et al., 2005) and the preference of micro firms to adopt a training culture that is mainly focussed on immediately applicable learning (Kelliher and Henderson, 2006) contributes to a lack of opportunity for developmental learning and reflection. As a result, learning motivations seek to solve short-term issues in this business environment and O/Ms tend to develop their skills by trial and error (Schaper et al., 2005). Lawless et al. (2000) label this approach to learning as crisis driven, as learning occurs as much by accident as by design. Thus, micro firm O/Ms may not be even aware that learning is occurring in their business and when this is coupled with a lack of formal education, little sense of learning identity is instilled (Florén, 2003; Florén and Tell, 2004; Lawless et al., 2000; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Schaper et al., 2005).

The learning culture in the micro firm tends to be informal (Greenbank, 2000; Matlay, 1999; Reijonen and Komppula, 2007; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007) and is often a by-product of informal social interactions with peers rather than the specific focus (Devins et al., 2005; Jaouen and Lasch, 2015). Successful micro firm O/Ms rely on social relationships (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Taylor and Thorpe, 2004; Wenger, 1998) incorporating regular use of professional and personal networks (Jaouen and Lasch, 2015) to develop their expertise in order to create and maintain their business (Meccheri and Pelloni, 2006). This is particularly the case in rural environments (Phillipson et al., 2004; Reijonen and Komppula, 2007; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003) as these areas are internally connected (culturally, economically, politically and socially) and any learning that occurs predominantly follows an informal process (Meccheri and Pelloni, 2006). This fits well with social learning theory and in particular the community of practice perspective (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) which forms the theoretical base of this research. Of relevance is the recent finding that subsistence micro firm O/Ms

have no networks to speak of (Jaouen and Lasch, 2015) thereby limiting the potential for social learning to occur.

2.3.3 Micro firm approach to strategy

According to Reijonen and Komppula (2007), Mazzarol et al. (2009) and Murphy et al. (2015), formal strategic planning is rarely seen in micro firms. Thomas and Thomas (2006) argue that the lack of strategy making in tourism micro firms may be due to a number of factors, including budgetary constraints, lifestyle motivation and emotional commitments to the area or lack of time. Kelliher and Reinl (2009), Jaouen and Lasch (2015) and North et al. (2016) reinforce this view, stating that limited internal expertise can curtail planning activities in micro firms. Notably, Greenbank (2000) and Murphy et al. (2015) argue that strategic planning may be useful to some micro business O/Ms as they may gain experience from the process of planning. However, strategies need to be transparent and well defined (Stokes, 2008) and planned to ensure success (Jaouen and Lasch, 2015). Noel and Latham (2006) contend that ‘sub-optimal strategies’ seem to be employed when O/Ms are under severe time pressure, which can lead to sub-standard business performance. This view is compounded by Jaouen and Lasch (2015) who add that sub-optimal strategies occur when the micro firm O/M lacks sales and management skills as well as financial resources. These sub-optimal strategies can be improved by setting difficult and specific learning goals (Murphy et al., 2015); however this is a difficult task in the micro firm environment as short-term issues take priority (Hill, 2004).

O/Ms may not achieve full potential because they have not considered, designed and created a workable strategy that sets them apart from their competition (Lechner and Vidar Gudmundsson, 2014; North et al., 2016). However, the O/M often holds the business objectives implicitly (Phillipson et al., 2004; Jaouen and Lasch, 2015) leveraging competitive advantage through local knowledge. A distinct advantage of this informal strategic planning process is that the O/M has direct contact with locals, suppliers, customers and employees (Kelliher and Reinl, 2009), which allows’ them to respond swiftly to market signals (Wickham, 2001). Stokes (2008) study suggests that it may not

fitting to have a formal strategy document in this context, as a micro tourism business strategy is about developing and managing effective network relationships to carry the business forward. As such, it is incorrect to assume that micro firms do not plan at all as some O/Ms have a clear mental framework of future plans (Kelliher and Reinl, 2009), and therefore the development of this framework by micro firm O/Ms can potentially enhance the survival of the business in the longer term. In a rural context, strategic planning needs to incorporate the 'community feeling' in the tourism product as rural O/Ms may not commit to collaboration (von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003) and development activities if this is not the case (Komppula, 2004).

2.3.4 Micro firm resource constraints

As discussed earlier, micro firms face 'resource poverty' (Alonso and Bressan, 2014; Devins et al., 2005; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004) and so the O/M operates under severe time, financial and expertise constraints. These internal constraints act as a barrier to the individual micro firm with regard to development, learning and the exploitation of opportunities (Phillipson et al., 2004; Raley and Moxey, 2000; Lechner and Vidar Gudmundsson, 2014). It is important to consider these three constraints separately as they are of particular concern when contemplating learning in the micro firm environment (Kelliher and Henderson, 2006; Murphy et al., 2015). Specifically, short term issues faced by the business can take priority (Hill, 2004; Schaper et al., 2005) over the firm's learning strategy (Murphy et al., 2015) and a reactive approach to learning development can be instituted (Devins et al., 2005; Greenbank, 2000) as a result.

2.3.4.1 Time constraints

A number of studies have considered the lack of time as a particular concern in the micro firm environment (Kelliher and Reinl, 2009; Schaper et al., 2005). In addition to the wide ranging tasks that the O/M tends to in the day to day running of the business, findings from research conducted by Alstrup (2000) and Li-Jen and Lockwood (2006) suggest that keeping up with new legislation such as fire, health and safety regulations is a key time

constraint in small businesses. Related red tape and bureaucracy takes precedence over learning and business development, causing the micro firm to neglect education and skill development (Schaper et al., 2005; Jaouen and Lasch, 2015).

Jones et al. (2010) note the importance of reflexive learning taking place and that the O/M needs time to think strategically about their business in order for new knowledge to be created. Reflection is a difficult task for micro firms as they are primarily action oriented (Kelliher and Reinl, 2009) and the O/M is faced with a clear disadvantage in terms of learning if it is side stepped (Devins et al., 2005). To overcome this learning barrier, Siemens (2010) suggests that rural micro firms should develop cooperative relationships in and with their community. This view is further supported by Schaper et al. (2005), who suggest that such relationships facilitate '*cross-participant learning*' (p. 20) and afford micro firm O/Ms the opportunity to leverage resources and information that would otherwise be outside their reach (Kelliher et al., 2014; Lynch and Morrison, 2007; Tinsley and Lynch, 2008). Thus, micro firm O/Ms who work with other O/Ms in their community can develop solutions to business challenges more quickly than doing so alone, thereby freeing up time for more strategic learning focused goals. In this context, the development of rapport amongst rural micro firm O/Ms should not be an issue as these learning relationships are influenced by 'close others' (Brouder and Eriksson, 2013; Devins et al., 2005).

2.3.4.2 Financial constraints

It has been widely accepted that access to funding for micro firms can be restricted (Freel, 1999; Gill and Biger, 2012; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Schaper et al., 2005). Seens (2013) notes that between 2000 and 2010 on average 25 per cent of small Canadian businesses sought external financing per year, where the majority of the financing was required for debt funding. Comparatively, in 2010, 26 per cent of UK small businesses sought finance within the preceding 12 months, in order to gain working capital or cash flow (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2010). Beck and Demirguc-Kunt (2006) argue growth can be constrained by a lack of finance for small businesses, but that

this constraint can be relaxed through the use of financing instruments such as guarantees for innovative firms.

Meccheri and Pelloni (2006) and Siemens (2015) found that rural O/Ms are more likely to rely on their own method of finance, as they are more self-sufficient than their urban counterparts. In the face of external impulses such as increased competition, rural micro firms draw on personal savings (O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000) or reduce spending on new investments in order to cope with such impulses (Phillipson et al., 2004; Siemens, 2015). While finance is not the main motivating factor for rural family run tourism businesses (Mottiar, 2007; Zhao and Getz, 2008), Li-Jen and Lockwood (2006) found that limited financial resources act as a barrier to success in tourism firms in the UK. Gill and Biger (2012) recommend that small businesses in Canada should network with other entrepreneurs and small businesses to minimise market challenges, a view that is reinforced in Steiner and Atterton's research (2015). From a tourism micro firm context, Ahmad (2005) supports this advice arguing that financial constraints can be controlled to an extent by networking. This is important as a lack of funding can lead to minimal learning and development (Schaper et al., 2005) particularly in the rural context (Steiner and Atterton, 2015), highlighting the importance of tourism/ small business policy support measures to aid participation in the rural context (March and Wilkinson, 2009). Appropriate funding for collaborative learning activity is a key factor in learning community sustainability (Morrison, et al., 2004), amplifying its importance in the current study.

2.3.4.3 Human resource constraints

Micro firms lack the resources to employ professional managers, and so O/Ms must develop their own set of managerial skills to develop their business (North et al., 2016; Shaper et al., 2005). Morrison and Teixeira (2004) argue that the lack of managerial resources influences attitudes towards business development in a rural tourism context. Simpson (2001) acknowledges this view and believes micro firms tend to employ staff with generalist skill sets over specialists, to the detriment of business development.

The most important human resource in a micro firm is the O/M (Jaouen and Lasch, 2015; Reijonen and Komppula, 2007; Schaper et al., 2005; Tzschentke et al., 2008) as they make all the decisions (as noted in section 2.3.1.3) and have to take full responsibility for failure or success of the business (Holliday, 1995). In a tourism context, Morrison and Teixeira (2004) note that small firms can suffer from a lack of managerial capability because if the O/M is absent no one else can step in and take their place. As a result the micro firms ability to function optimally becomes constrained (Down, 1999), as does their ability to participate in collaborative learning processes (Murphy et al., 2015; Steiner and Atterton, 2015).

Research indicates that human resource constraints are somewhat amplified in a rural setting (Alonso and Bressan, 2014; Phillipson et al., 2004; Stathopoulou et al., 2004). For example from a Canadian rural small businesses perspective, Siemens (2010: 71; 2015) argues that O/Ms may have to recruit staff from outside the locality; leading to less commitment from them to the rural area, and so they leave for better job opportunities in developed areas (Meccheri and Pelloni, 2006) when they arise. This can lead to a high staff turnover, which impacts negatively on learning in the rural small business.

Having discussed the internal characteristics of a micro firm, for clarity, the following table maps the key points extracted from the literature and how these impact the approach to and focus on learning.

Table 2.1: Micro Firm Internal Characteristics

Owner/ manager traits	Rural tourism micro firm O/M	Impact on learning
Education	Majority have not engaged in formal education as they perceive practical experience as being superior	Lack of competence to undertake reflection and engage in problem solving beyond their own firms/ communities
Motivation/ personal values	Preference for lifestyle over growth orientated businesses	Display a shallow depth of involvement in learning
Prior business experience	Skills and knowledge acquired from learning by doing	Learning momentum stalls in the absence of external triggers
Owner-led culture	Preference to learn informally and must be immediately applicable	Unaware learning is occurring- hinders learner identity development
Strategic planning	No formal strategy but holds a mental framework of future plans	Sub-optimal strategies may be employed; Intuitive approach to planning
Resource constraints	Faces 'resource poverty'-time, financial and human	Competence development, reflection, collaboration and managerial capability/ staff expertise constrained

2.4 Impact of the external environment on micro firms

It is clear that micro firms leverage capabilities from the external environment (Heidari et al., 2014; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009) in an attempt to overcome many of the internal challenges they face. However, micro firms also face external challenges including; prevailing economic conditions, government policy and the political environment. Micro tourism operators often find it difficult to achieve economies of scale in an extremely competitive environment (Kearney et al., 2014; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Polo and Frías, 2010). These challenges are further amplified in a rural location for tourism micro firms, as the geographical area they operate in is limited (von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003) and therefore their customer reach is lower than their urban counterparts. Furthermore, as the amount of capital required to start-up a tourism micro firm is relatively small, barriers to entry are low and competition can be very high in peripheral areas (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007) as a result.

An external shock such as a global economic downturn [as occurred in 2008] can affect rural micro firms both socially and economically as diminished tourist numbers cause O/Ms to reduce their income and hence household spend as a consequence (Phillipson et al., 2004; Siemens, 2015). However, Phillipson et al. (2004) note that rural micro firm O/Ms can learn from the experience of coping with the external shock and therefore the experience can be deemed an advantage with regard to future adverse shocks. Rural micro firm O/Ms become resilient as they deal with challenges from the external environment (Phillipson et al., 2004; Siemens, 2015). Increasing government legislation can also impact micro firms in the marketplace as O/Ms can become frustrated with the growing amount of paper work that needs to be completed (Alstrup, 2000; Li-Jen and Lockwood, 2006) given the resource constraints they face (see section 2.3.4 above). Furthermore, micro firms have little power in contributing/ influencing important decisions made by government in their locality (McAreavey and McDonagh, 2011; Thomas and Thomas, 2006). Thus, the micro firm O/M may be discouraged to grow the business (Murphy et al., 2015) and as a consequence there may be little scope for investment in, or the pursuit of learning. However this is a misnomer as the complex nature of maintaining a business requires

continued personal and professional development, regardless of whether the micro firm has a growth focus.

2.5 Rural micro firm learning – emergent themes

When contemplated collectively, the emerging themes relating to rural micro firm learning can be considered in reference to: catalyst for collaboration, inter-relationships, micro firm learning strategies, O/M identity, micro firm learning resources and learning development, as summarised in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2 Rural Micro Firm Learning: Emergent Themes

Key learning themes	Description	Supporting literature
Catalyst for collaboration	Overcome resource challenges.	Ahmad, 2005; Gill and Biger, 2012; Schaper et al., 2005; Siemens, 2010; Steiner and Atterton, 2015.
Inter-relationships	Predominantly informal; Dynamic - need to be developed over time - lead to enhanced expertise; Influenced by close others - emphasis on trust.	Phillipson et al., 2004; Reijonen and Komppula, 2007; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003. Reijonen and Komppula, 2007; Stokes, 2008. Brouder and Eriksson, 2013; Devins et al., 2005.
Micro firm learning strategies	Informal, opportunistic strategies - tacit in nature; Reliance on peers for learning/ knowledge exchange; Short term goals take priority - immediate practical impact on the business is required; Motivation influenced: Lifestyle versus growth.	Lechner and Vidar Gudmundsson, 2014; Reinl and Kelliher, 2010; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003. Phillipson et al., 2004; Reijonen and Komppula, 2007; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003. Down, 1999; Hill, 2004; Schaper et al., 2005. Getz and Carlsen, 2005; Jaouen and Lasch, 2015; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; North et al., 2016; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003.
O/M Identity	Strong business identity; Lack of resources equate to limited sense of learning identity.	Florén, 2003; Florén and Tell, 2004; Lawless et al., 2000; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004 Schaper et al., 2005; Steiner and Atterton, 2015.
Learning resources	Constrained resource; Informal resources - peer learning, knowledge sharing may be implicit.	Devins et al., 2005; Phillipson et al., 2004; Raley and Moxey, 2000; North et al., 2016. Kelliher et al., 2009; Matlay, 2000; Meccheri and Pelloni, 2006; Reinl and Kelliher, 2010.
Learning development	Occurs tacitly in practice as O/Ms complete daily tasks; Influenced by internal and external resource constraints; Challenges from external environment.	Florén and Tell, 2004; Halme, 2001; Jaouen and Lasch, 2015; Morrison et al., 2004; Steiner and Atterton, 2015. Devins et al., 2005; Greenbank, 2000; Steiner and Atterton, 2015. Kearney et al., 2014; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Polo and Frías, 2010.

It is clear from the discussion above (see table 2.2) that rural micro firm O/Ms rely on social relationships to develop their expertise as they interact with peers as they go about

their business in pursuit of individual and community/ tourism development goals (Florén and Tell, 2004; Halme, 2001; Jaouen and Lasch, 2015; Morrison et al., 2004; Steiner and Atterton, 2015). In doing so, O/Ms develop learning competence over time and within a community framework. This perspective underpins why Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice perspective is considered an appropriate lens through which to explore: *What are the elements and relationships that influence learning in evolving learning communities in the micro firm rural tourism context?*

2.6 Conclusion

Given the ‘socially constructed’ nature of the micro firm business and learning environment, it is evident (as noted in the literature, see for example: Chell and Baines, 2000; Fuller-Love and Thomas, 2004; Jaouen and Lasch, 2015; Siemens, 2010) in a tourism context in particular (Ahmad, 2005; Reijonen and Komppula, 2007; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Stokes, 2008) that the O/M relies on external social relationships to overcome internal resource constraints and external environmental influences.

Learning and development in the micro firm can be difficult as the O/M can adopt a reactive approach due to the resource constraints they face. Therefore, from a rural tourism perspective, it is important that micro firm O/Ms cultivate collaborative relationships where learning in practice can potentially support business development (Jaouen and Lasch, 2015; Komppula, 2004; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003). Ultimately, the success or failure of the micro firm will depend on the O/M’s ability to build and leverage social learning capital from the learning communities they engage in.

The next chapter explores micro firm learning from a social learning perspective, focusing specifically on the community of practice perspective (Lave and Wenger, 1991) which forms the theoretical base of this research study.

Chapter Three

The Rural Micro Firm and the Social Learning Process

3.0 Chapter overview

The chapter begins with a discussion on the orientations of learning to facilitate an understanding of where this research study resides in relation to existing learning theory. The theoretical base for this research study is the social learning theory and Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice (CoP) perspective has been adopted for use in this study. An outline of the three core concepts of the CoP perspective is provided; these include practice, identity and participation. The CoP literature notes that an individual can display various forms of participation and identity in a CoP and therefore learner qualities, the learning trajectories of newcomers, and learning brokers and their role as boundary spanners are discussed in the context of the research aim and objectives.



While the CoP perspective locates learning within a communal domain it also acknowledges that individual learning can be influenced by many characteristics. In the context of this research study; learner autonomy (see glossary and section 3.3.1 below), motivation and learning preference of the O/M are explored. Following this, formal and informal dimensions to learning are discussed in learning environments relevant to this study (i.e. the micro firm learning community (LC), facilitated LC, independent LC and evolving LC). As there is a lack of research focusing on social learning in micro firm environments, despite the relevance of social learning theory in a tourism context (Shaw and Williams, 2009) its value in a rural tourism micro firm setting is also outlined in this chapter.

3.1 Orientations to learning

There are four main orientations to learning: behavioural, cognitivist, humanist and social and situational, as illustrated in table 3.1 below. Considering the theoretical base adopted in this research is Lave and Wenger's (1991) CoP perspective, the most appropriate learning orientation is the social and situational perspective. Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that individual's learn and develop their competence as they interact with others in a social setting, which fits well with tourism micro firm O/M learning as they rely on social relationships to develop their expertise. While the researcher contemplated alternative orientations to learning (Behaviourist, Cognitivist and Humanist), these perspectives do not take into account the value of social learning relationships to an individual's learning and therefore they are inappropriate in the context of this study.

Table 3.1 below considers learning orientation, its locus and its potential impact on individual learning. In its simplest meaning, the behaviourist perspective refers to the learner responding to environmental stimuli and as they react their behaviour changes which results in learning. The cognitivist perspective assumes that learning will occur when mental processes such as thinking, memory and problem solving are explored and acted on. Rogers (1961) emphasised the importance of the individual in his humanist perspective of learning. Rogers argued that learning occurs as an individual acts to achieve their full potential. The social and situational perspective is rooted in social learning theory and its premise is that individuals learn as they continuously interact with others in social practice by observing their behaviours and actions. Social learning theorists such as Bandura believe that as individuals listen and pay attention to others, learning will occur. Social learning theory endorses the importance of work practice over abstract knowledge to an individual's learning (Brown and Duguid, 1991), which fits well with Lave and Wenger's (1991) CoP perspective. The latter perspective falls under social learning theory and underlines the theoretical base of this study and therefore is of particular significance in this research.

Table 3.1: Orientations to Learning

Aspect of learning	Behaviourist	Cognitivist	Humanist	Social and Situational
View of the learning process	Observable behaviour i.e. changes in behaviour.	Learning takes place through mental processes e.g. storing and retrieving information, perception.	Individual growth in the learner.	Interactions between people in a social setting.
Locus of learning	External - comes from environment.	Internal cognitive structures.	Cognitive - subconscious mind, anxiety.	Interaction with environment and other participants.
Impact on individual learning	Skills training.	Making sense of events - thinking about them; Developmental changes.	Individuals control their own learning - choice.	Social participation - periphery to the centre of participation.
Learning theorists	Kolb  Bandura 	Kolb	Rogers	Lave and Wenger Bandura

Adapted from Smith (1999)

In relation to the assembled learning theorists (table 3.1), it is important to note that overlaps exist between these learning orientations. Specifically, while Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory is focused on cognitivist theory, his work is believed to have come from a behaviourist orientation. The critical point of his theory is that all learning will have its roots in experience. Kolb illustrated learning as a cyclical process which includes four components: experience, observation, reflection and acting which will ultimately lead to the creation of new experiences and therefore all elements are united in his view. In contrast, Bandura (1977) believes that observing human behaviour is a more proficient way in developing complex skills and behaviours than learning by trial and error (Rogers, 1961). Smith (1999) suggests, that Bandura attempts to bridge the gap between behavioural and social and situational orientations.

Roger's (1961) humanist theory pays little attention to the importance of prior experience of an individual in a group setting; therefore further highlighting the difference between the two learning perspectives (humanist and social). While learning from experience under

the cognitivist orientation has been well documented in the literature (Halme, 2001; Kolb, 1984; Man, 2007), Lave and Wenger (1991: 47) argue that this perspective does not take into account the nature of the world the learner is in or the relations of the learner, and so they argue that the emphasis should be placed on the learner as a participant within social practice. Thus, Lave and Wenger (1991) argue for a shift from viewing the individual as learner to learning as participation in social practice where the latter is the context that stimulates learning (table 3.1). As discussed in section 2.3.1.2, Schaper et al. (2005) argue that social and situational interactions are how micro firm O/Ms develop their skills. Bandura (1997) suggests that observing the behaviours of others is key to skill development. However, this approach to learning is rejected by Lave and Wenger (1991), as they believe it does not acknowledge the significance of social learning relationships.

From a social and situational theory perspective, Lave and Wenger (1991) believe learning is socially constructed and socially dependent. Learning occurs as a result of social relationships within situations of co-participation. Kelliher (2006: 62) notes the value of collective learning in the micro firm context when seeking higher level learning⁶. A CoP can facilitate interaction and observation as it permits an individual to communicate with colleagues and therefore engage in learning (Li et al., 2009). As noted in chapter two, as micro firm O/Ms leverage and build social relationships with others in their community, learning occurs. This social participation in a community is the key to how individuals learn.

In light of the research aim (i.e. *To explore the elements and relationships that influence learning in evolving learning communities in the micro firm rural tourism context*) and the micro firm learning criteria identified in table 2.2 (p. 32), the most appropriate learning orientation is the social learning theory (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) which sits under the social and situational learning perspective (see table 3.1 above). To reiterate, this perspective will be used as a theoretical baseline when discussing the learning literature in the subsequent chapters.

⁶ Higher level or double loop learning occurs when individuals change the way they think, their assumptions, values and judgements in the pursuit of dealing with problems and developing new skills (Florén and Tell, 2004; Halme, 2001; Valkering et al., 2013).

Section 1: Community of Practice perspective

The CoP learning perspective originates from the seminal work conducted by Lave and Wenger (1991) which explored how newcomers or novices to an informal group become established practitioners of that group. The term CoP was first used by Lave and Wenger to explain learning through practice and participation which they labelled situated learning (see section 3.2.1 below). Thompson (2005) notes that Lave and Wenger's (1991) CoP perspective has gained increasing academic and practitioner interest when referring to collaboration in communities as it gives researchers and individuals a mind-set to look at an individual's identity, learning and development as they participate in learning communities with others. Lave and Wenger (1991: 98) define the concept:

A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice. A community of practice is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge, not least because it provides the interpretive support necessary for making sense of its heritage. Thus, participation in the cultural practice in which any knowledge exists is an epistemological principle of learning. The social structure of this practice, its power relations, and its condition for legitimacy define possibilities for learning (i.e., legitimate peripheral participation).

There are a number of indicators which can be used to classify the formation of a community as a CoP (see table 3.2 below). Wenger et al. (2011) identify that a network and a CoP approach to learning are not the same thing but they do acknowledge that both approaches are strongly interrelated. They argue that a CoP approach to learning highlights that as learning partnerships evolve, identities are formed around a common domain which can enhance learning as trust and commitment builds amongst learners (as per table 3.2), whereas a network approach primarily focuses on connections amongst members and not a commitment to a communal domain. Thus, as this study aims to explore the elements and relationships that influence learning, it is important to clarify the formation of the community and therefore key indicators of a CoP are outlined next in table 3.2.

Table 3.2: Community of Practice Indicators

Indicator	Description
Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A system of interaction;• Self-designing and self-coordinating;• Common routines and procedures;• Ways and styles of co-operating;• Specific competences or capacities for action and learning.
Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Norms are formed as members interact with one another.
Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Involves both action and connection;• Willing and productive;• Possibility of mutual recognition → ability to negotiate meaning as shared meaning is constructed.
Identities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Emergent and on-going through life and different social settings;• Constructed in relation to learning communities.

Adapted from Wenger (1998; 1999)

Table 3.2 demonstrates, *‘the relational aspects of learning within a community of practice in contrast to individual assumptions’* (Handley et al., 2006: 641). Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) argued that in order for individuals to learn effectively, knowledge must not be isolated from practice thereby highlighting the importance of context for learning. This latter assumption requires an explanation of situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation, core concepts in Lave and Wenger’s (1991) social learning theory which are outlined next.

3.2.1 Situated learning

Learning is a social activity and an evolving social learning process⁷ where members come together to participate in practice and the shared pursuit of knowledge of some kind (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Thus, learning is emergent and not abstract. It is the social engagement between people that provides the context in which learning can occur, placing an emphasis on learning from participation in practice (referred to as situated learning) as opposed to the more traditional notion of classroom based learning. In addition to Lave and Wenger (1991) this perspective is supported by Brown and Duguid (1991), Reinl and

⁷ For the purpose of this research the social learning process refers to members participating in social practice and as they do so their identities change. As this happens, identities need to be negotiated amongst members fuelling a learning dynamic within the community (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Handley et al., 2006; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Kelliher (2014) and Handley et al. (2006) among others. It follows that learning cannot be separated from social practice and therefore situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991) acknowledges that conflicts may arise amongst participants as a result, which will have to be negotiated for learning momentum to be maintained in a CoP (Handley et al., 2006). The concept of situated learning is particularly fitting in a micro firm (Alonso and Bressan, 2014; Devins et al., 2005; Down, 1999; Gibb and Scott, 2001), in a rural context (Meccheri and Pelloni, 2006; Siemens, 2015) and in a tourism context (Denicolai et al., 2010; Halme, 2001) due to the social and situational nature of tourism development (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Shaw and Williams, 2009). Here, complex learning can occur in the absence of formal learning provision via '*participation in the social world*' (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 43). However, external impulses (such as a new regulation, increased competition, grants and funding for local tourism development projects) may be required to trigger internal development and fuel a learning dynamic within the micro firm (Kelliher and Reinl, 2009; O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000; Phillipson et al., 2004). These impulses may act as a learning catalyst for situated learning.

3.2.1.1 Legitimate peripheral participation (LPP)

Brown and Duguid (1991) note that Lave and Wenger's (1991) LPP concept provides individuals a tool for understanding learning across different contexts. CoP learning commences as members join and participate at the periphery of the communities' activities, a stage labelled by Lave and Wenger (1991) as 'legitimate peripheral participation'. At the beginning, established practitioners should nurture and support newcomers as the various experiences and perspectives they bring can enrich the learning process (Wenger, 1998). In addition, informal meetings amongst newcomers and established practitioners provide the context to share their stories of experience with one another and as a result, gaps in practice can be identified and practitioners can develop solutions to their problems (Lave and Wenger, 1991). As the newcomer adopts the practices and behaviours of other longer established practitioners it provides an environment where individuals can share information and utilise new knowledge in practice (Li et al., 2009). As they do so, the newcomer will become more competent in their role and therefore they are allowed limited participation, and finally they become

master practitioners, enjoying the benefits of being a ‘full participant’ in that they are more involved and proficient in their LC role (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

3.2.1.2 Expert participation and the emergence of learning brokers

As CoP members become expert participants they better understand the cultural and social values of the community, which provides them with the necessary skills to engage effectively in the LC (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991). In the context of this research, this development allows them to be an active player in supporting the private sector, be creative, provide necessary resources and take responsibility for development outcomes (Levin, 1993), ultimately creating an identity as a ‘learning broker’ so they can continue their learning route (Campbell et al., 2009).

A learning broker is an individual that facilitates learning (Iles and Yolles, 2004, Lave and Wenger, 1991) by assisting the wider community to identify and leverage learning opportunities. This individual acts as the catalyst for knowledge transfer (Kelliher et al., 2009), sustainable learning relationships (Florén and Tell, 2004; Halme, 2001; Morrison et al., 2004) and learner autonomy (Halme, 2001; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011) (see chapter four for further discussion). All of the latter studies have been conducted in formal learning network settings and therefore in an independent LC (see glossary) a broker must demonstrate strong leadership skills, they should distribute roles to other members and clearly define them, are enthusiastic, and have a holistic vision in doing so that best serves the common interest in the community (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). A broker in an independent LC setting also requires effective communication skills so that they encourage negotiation amongst members; thereby stimulating the evolution of learning within the community (Marsden et al., 2010).

3.2.1.3 Learning as a deepening process of participation

According to Lave and Wenger (1991) the learning development of individuals is identifiable as they move from peripheral to full participation within the LC and in doing so they also engage in higher or lower level learning. Argyris and Schön's (1978) refer to 'double loop' (higher level) and 'single loop' (lower level) learning. Higher level or double loop learning occurs when individuals change the way they think, their assumptions, values and judgements in the pursuit of dealing with problems and developing new skills (Florén and Tell, 2004; Halme, 2001; Valkering et al., 2013). From a CoP perspective, members socially construct their understanding of a community as they interact with others over time, they learn how the group operates and adjust to its views so that they can function in the community and perform their role (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) equating to higher level learning. Halme (2001) provides a number of examples of higher level learning in a tourism network context which include the development of new interaction channels being established with stakeholders in a community. For this depth of learning to occur micro firm O/Ms need to be able to unlearn previous held assumptions and beliefs by reflecting on past experiences (Florén and Tell, 2004; Man, 2007). This can be difficult as micro firm O/Ms are action orientated (see section 2.3.4.1) and if reflection is absent this cohort can become caught in '*definite language and truth claims*' (Cunliffe and Jong, 2005: 227). In the context of collaborative activity, Florén and Tell (2004) suggest that time is required for members to open up fully and discuss problems, allowing valuable contributions to the group's learning (Argyris and Schöns, 1996).

Micro firm O/Ms can also engage in lower level or single loop learning. This depth of learning is referred to as incremental learning in the literature as O/Ms simply display what they have used and learnt in the past to solve current problems (Florén and Tell, 2004; Halme, 2001). Old ways of solving problems are reused by individuals counteracting the development of new ideas/ ways and hence deeper learning, for example technical knowledge possessed by individuals is associated with lower level learning (Valkering et al., 2013). From a CoP perspective, Brown and Duguid (1991) note that if learning is to be fostered by members, individuals must learn in practice and not from abstract knowledge

(Lave and Wenger, 1991). After defining the CoP perspective and introducing its core concepts above, its three key dimensions (practice, participation and identity) in the LC context are explored in further detail in the following sections.

3.2.2 Practice within a learning community

According to Brown and Duguid (2001: 203), practice is '*undertaking or engaging fully in a task, job or profession*'. From a community perspective, it is the '*doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do*' (Wenger, 1998: 47). Thus, by referring to the historical context, Wenger (1998) acknowledges that individuals can and do participate in numerous communities over time.

Wenger (1998) identifies three aspects of practice that typify a learning community (as per table 3.2 above). Firstly, as members engage with one another a set of norms and relationships are established and shared meaning is created based on mutual engagement. Secondly, as members are brought together there is a sense of joint enterprise as members work together in pursuit of a common goal. Finally, members develop and share a range of communal resources (for example documents, tools, stories or procedures) to negotiate meaning and assist with collaborative learning over time. In the context of this research, practice can be thought of as rural micro firm O/Ms and other stakeholders going about their daily business with networks (formal and informal) providing a community framework where learning can occur through practice within the LC. As individual and collective learning blend together shared practice is enhanced within the LC (Wenger et al., 2011).

Participation and identity are both closely linked to practice (Brown and Duguid, 2001). As members participate in practice their identity will evolve. Lave and Wenger (1991: 53) argue that participation and identity belong to practice as '*learning is not merely a condition for membership but is itself an evolving form of membership*' and therefore both concepts deserve consideration.

3.2.2.1 Participation and identity and their link to practice

Participation is central to social learning theory and at a basic level it refers to active engagement in the practice of a social community (Wenger, 1998). In order to participate in a CoP, individuals are required to connect as well as take part (Wenger 1998: 55). The latter highlights the importance of the need for engagement which goes beyond passive participation. Active members regularly contribute to the practice of the LC while passive members do not, and only participate to feel a sense of belonging (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014).

Other forms of participation exist in the CoP literature, these include marginal and voluntary participation. From Wenger's (1998) perspective 'marginal participation' does not always lead to full participation in the CoP (Lave, 2004). There has been confusion in the CoP literature in relation to this concept as Wenger (1998: 116) argues that marginal participation is a form of non-participation. Handley et al. (2006) agree with Wenger's perspective, noting that an individual is not participating if they do not navigate from the periphery to the centre of the CoP over time. In contrast, Kelliher et al. (2014) argue that marginal members can act as boundary spanners, eliciting interim information from the outside world which they then bring back to the CoP. These members may stay at the community periphery indefinitely and yet still actively contribute, albeit on an interim basis. As a consequence, Jørgensen and Keller (2008) conclude that there will be more members at the periphery of the community than anticipated by Wenger (1998) and Handley et al. (2006). This may be out of choice (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014) or because powerful practitioners can impede the periphery member's trajectory of learning to the centre of the CoP (Jørgensen, 2007). It is also important to acknowledge that some members can appear to be participating fully in the community but really they are just going through the motions, feeling no sense of belonging or desire to complete their trajectory of learning (Wenger, 1998). Reinl and Kelliher (2014) label these participants as surface members.

Meaning is created through participation and active involvement in practice. As individuals participate, interact or act in the social world they also gain access to the resources of that community for example; forms, documents, stories or rules and this resource access is referred to as reification by Wenger (1998). In simple terms, reification is a way of making an abstract and concise representation of what is often a complex and frequently messy practice, thus making it easier to share within the community. Thus, access to CoP learning resources is deemed to further influence CoP participant learning through reification. Wenger (1998: 8) notes that this resource access also provides a vocabulary to communicate, understand and negotiate reifications and hence participate intelligently in the practice of a community:

An adequate vocabulary is important ... to make sense of the world [as] it direct[s] both our perception and our actions. We pay attention to what we expect to see, we hear what we can place in our understanding, and we act according to our world views.

Dewey (1991) notes that reflection is equally important to fully participate in the CoP. Dewey believes that CoP members need to be reflexive thinkers, challenging their own thinking and decisions and to engage in critically analysing their '*own practices and ways of relating with others*' (Cunliffe and Jong, 2005: 227) in order to participate intelligently. Of note is that the tourism micro firm O/M's learning context is unique as the O/M has to recognise, overcome and reflect on events in order to experience higher level learning (Cope, 2003). While 'proactive reflection' (Cope and Watts, 2000) can give rise to challenging forms of learning, this can be challenging in a micro firm context due to the action orientated mind-set of the O/M.

An individual's identity within a CoP is formed in line with participation (Wenger, 1998). Jørgensen and Keller (2008) believe identity is the pivotal point between the group and the individual in social learning theory, as individuals identify themselves in relation to the collective. Ultimately learning is more than the development of an individual's practice and knowledge, it is also about understanding who we are and what communities of practice we belong to and are accepted in (Handley et al. 2006: 644). This perspective supports the idea that identity continuously evolves as an individual's learning develops.

Connections between past, present and future learning will influence a participant's learning trajectory (Wenger, 1998 Jørgensen and Keller, 2008). A learning trajectory '*is not a path that can be foreseen or charted but a continuous motion*' (Wenger, 1998: 154) and as meaning is negotiated by participants along this path, their learning and identities evolve. However, it is important that participants do more than just contemplate these trajectories; they should actively engage in these trajectories to establish their identity (Jørgensen and Keller, 2008). However, there can be '*a field of possible trajectories*' (Wenger, 1998: 156) in a CoP, requiring contemplation of each one. These identities and associated trajectories are considered next.

3.2.2.2 Identity and trajectory of learning in a community of practice

Specific identities and associated trajectories referred to in the CoP literature include; newcomers, learner qualities necessary for learning development, learning brokers and their role as boundary spanners. These are explored in order to gain a clearer understanding of the influence the learning trajectory concept has on developing/ establishing a participant's identity.

3.2.2.2.1 Newcomers

As highlighted in section 3.2.1.1, newcomers to the CoP learn at the borders of practice first (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger label this stage of their CoP involvement 'legitimate peripheral participation', as newcomers are only beginning their journey to the centre of practice. Social learning engages the newcomer in the community. As members have a shared interest in a CoP, a newcomer's role in the community gives them an identity, which facilitates interaction and engagement, and as they build relationships they learn from one another over time (Wenger, 2006). In this way, the newcomer offers many learning opportunities for established members to exploit. Hara and Schwen (2006) highlight the fact that experienced members ('old-timers') of the CoP can learn from newcomers/ novices as they can share experiences with each other, which can facilitate brainstorming in the CoP.

Brown and Duguid (1991) emphasise the importance of the periphery of practice as a site where newcomers not just gain valuable information but also the style and technique of established practitioners as they complete their daily tasks. The newcomer's identity will develop into a 'full participant' as they become more involved and proficient in their role in the community (Lave and Wenger, 1991), although others believe that members can also participate from the margins (Kelliher et al., 2014). As newcomers become expert participants they understand the cultural and social values of the community, as they develop their cultural knowledge of the CoP (Hara, 2009) which provides them with the necessary skills to seek learning opportunities to enhance their identity so they can continue their learning route (Campbell et al., 2009). Therefore, as a newcomer's participation increases in a CoP and hence as their learning progresses, their identity is restructured. However, this simple notion of learning identity overlooks learner qualities that are critical for the learning development process (Wenger, 1998).

3.2.2.2.2 Learner qualities as a catalyst in the learning trajectory

For learners to overcome issues/ problems they face as they navigate their learning journey to the centre of practice, they must co-participate and socially construct their understanding with others according to Lave and Wenger (1991). For this to happen, individuals require a degree of legitimacy as learning will be difficult if this is absent. Learners also need to engage in reflection if they are to be capable of participating intelligently in a CoP, and want to achieve full participation which can be difficult in a micro firm LC as some members may choose to remain at the periphery at their own accord (as referred to in section 3.2.2.1 above).

Although a CoP is characterised as an informal environment, Garavan et al. (2007) acknowledge that relationships amongst members may need to be managed. In this context, the broker needs to be able understand and make sense of the contributions made by other members for their learning to progress as the community evolves according to Handley et al. (2006). A broker can promote learner autonomy (see section 3.3.1 below) by encouraging other members to 'think outside the box' while engaging in negotiation, and in doing so the broker stimulates the development of leadership qualities in others

including vision, enthusiasm and energy to participate at a deeper level in the community (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Garavan et al., 2007; Wenger, 1998). In a LC setting, it is particularly important that the broker acts in a boundary spanning capacity if the boundaries of the community are to remain open and permeable (Wenger et al., 2011; Kelliher et al., 2014). Thus, the role of the learning broker as a boundary spanner is outlined next.

3.2.2.2.3 The role of the learning broker as a boundary spanner

Wenger (1998; 2000) labels the role of the learning broker in his research as that of a ‘boundary spanner’ (see glossary and chapter four for further discussion), as it can encompass a variety of forms. A ‘learning broker’ facilitates collaborative learning (Garavan et al., 2007; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Valkering et al., 2013) and champions long-term LC relationships by intensifying communication amongst members (Halme, 2001). In doing so, the learning broker facilitates learning amongst community members by developing their learning competence (Florén, 2003; Lave and Wenger, 1991), encouraging reflection (Florén and Tell, 2004; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011) and assisting others to seek out and leverage learning opportunities from peers and other tourism/business development stakeholders (Johannisson, 2000). This results in individual and community learning capability being enhanced (Sullivan, 2000). Boundary spanners act in a knowledge transfer capacity between the CoP and the external environment. If this is the case they may be seen by other CoP members as having a peripheral identity (Jørgensen and Keller, 2008) and therefore their role will likely require legitimacy as it is *‘implicated in social structures involving relations of power’* (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 36) and as the boundary spanner interacts with other CoPs that have distinct practices and identities (Handley et al., 2006), they can transform practice which can be problematic in a LC environment as members are invested in practice (Carlile, 2002).

In summary, learning brokers in a CoP must demonstrate management and leadership traits if fragmented practice is to be overcome (Garavan et al., 2007). For clarity, table 3.3 summarises the identities in a CoP discussed above.

Table 3.3: Learner Identities within a Community of Practice

Identity	Description
Newcomer	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Learns at the periphery first (legitimate peripheral participation)• Requires legitimacy to navigate to the centre of practice• Brings invaluable ideas and experience to the CoP
Established practitioner	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Experienced members in the CoP – they have acquired the routines and cultural knowledge of the CoP• Identity evolves as they learn from the experiences and ideas brought to the community by newcomers
Learning broker	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Acts in a management and leadership capacity as they encourage learning traits amongst CoP members
Boundary spanner	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Operate at the periphery of the CoP• Transfers knowledge between communities and external environment
Marginal member	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Operate at the periphery of the CoP• Contributes interim insights to the CoP when deemed of value by the marginal member
Surface member	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Act as though they are moving toward full participation but really they are just going through the motions• Feel no sense of belonging or desire to complete their trajectory of learning

In considering the above, trajectories of learning and the ability of individuals to participate fully in community practice is inhibited by a number of influencers, for example; power imbalance between peripheral and central CoP members (Jørgensen and Keller, 2008; Marshall and Rollins, 2004), passive participation (Handley et al., 2006; Wenger, 1998), trust (Florén and Tell, 2004; Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Morrison et al., 2004), choice (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014) and learning histories (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Wenger, 1998). Each of these influencers will shape an individual's identity in a CoP as they hold different positions and perspectives (Jørgensen, 2007; Wenger, 1998) as they continue their learning trajectory. Therefore, as referred to earlier, some participants may never reach full participation and remain at the CoP periphery. These marginal participants also have a role to play in the CoP learning trajectory.

3.2.3 Negotiation of meaning

The negotiation of meaning is a fundamental component of learning from a CoP perspective (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and it is through this negotiation that '*we construct who we are*' and what we do (Wenger, 1998: 51). As members participate in the practice

of the community resources such as forms, documents, stories or rules emerge through sustained practice and are subsequently used to negotiate meaning (Li et al., 2009; Wenger, 1998). As members interpret these communal resources (reifications) differently, conflicts and issues can arise and as a consequence members are required to negotiate their meaning (Halme, 2001; Morrison et al., 2004) and their place in the community (Handley et al., 2006), and as they do so their identities are reconstructed (Jørgensen and Keller, 2008) (as noted above).

Further, Wenger (1998) notes that in order to achieve sustainable collaboration between community members, issues which are socially constructed need to be understood and shared with all members; *'the community of practice needs to develop... [a] socially defined way of doing things'* (Garavan et al., 2007: 38). Thus, this process of negotiation of meaning will contribute to the establishment of shared meaning in the CoP. In the context of this research *meaning* refers to making sense of reality by interpreting the construction of shared meanings shared by that social group (Brannick and Roche, 1997). As meaning can be quite subjective an individual needs to have *'the ability to understand the way in which human beings shape the world from inside themselves'* (Morgan and Smircich, 1980: 497). Shared meaning is socially constructed through interaction and as CoP members work together more than learning occurs; they also develop a shared sense of how to complete their responsibilities (Hara, 2009). Negotiation of meaning and the resultant establishment of shared meaning can be problematic in a LC environment due to the existence of power dynamics and the need for trustful relationships to be developed amongst members (Florén and Tell, 2004; Halme, 2001; Morrison et al., 2004; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014).

3.2.4 Community of practice – Emergent themes

The key learning themes forthcoming from the preceding discussion relate to the; learning catalyst in a situated learning environment such as a CoP, the inherent social learning process within such an environment, participation forms, negotiation of meaning and the

emergence of a learning broker from within the CoP active participant cohort. These CoP themes discussed above are outlined in table 3.4.

Table 3.4: Community of Practice: Emergent Themes

Key learning themes	Description	Supporting literature
Learning catalyst in a situated learning environment	<p>External impulses - new regulation or increased competition;</p> <p>Shared history - triggers learning and practice.</p>	<p>Kelliher and Reinl, 2009; O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000; Phillipson et al., 2004.</p> <p>Florén and Tell, 2004; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998.</p>
Social learning process	<p>Social engagement between people provides the context in which learning can occur - situated learning;</p> <p>Legitimate peripheral participation - progression from periphery to central position in the CoP - shared repertoire of communal resources is established - identity develops;</p> <p>Pursuit of shared meaning via informal narrative and the negotiation of practice;</p> <p>Trajectories of learning - influenced by power imbalance, trust, histories of learning.</p>	<p>Denicolai et al., 2010; Devins et al., 2005; Down, 1999; Gibb and Scott, 2001; Halme, 2001; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Meccheri and Pelloni, 2006; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Shaw and Williams, 2009.</p> <p>Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998.</p> <p>Lave and Wenger, 1991; Komppula, 2004; McAreavey and McDonagh, 2011.</p> <p>Jørgensen, 2007; Jørgensen and Keller, 2008; Wenger, 1998.</p>
Participation	<p>Numerous forms - Full, marginal and voluntarily participation;</p> <p>Vocabulary required to participate intelligently - reflection is important to critically analyse decisions/ thinking;</p> <p>Influenced by lifestyle and business motivation, histories of learning.</p>	<p>Handley et al., 2006; Lave, 2004; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998.</p> <p>Cunliffe and Jong, 2005; Dewey, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998.</p> <p>Florén and Tell, 2004; Getz and Carlsen, 2005; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011; Marchant and Mottiar, 2010; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Mottiar, 2007; Reijonen and Komppula, 2007; Wenger, 1998.</p>
Negotiation of meaning	<p>The construction of who we are and what we do;</p> <p>Conflicts and issues arise through the interpretation of communal resources (reifications). Members negotiate their place and reconstruct their identities;</p> <p>Encourages the establishment of shared meaning by developing a joint enterprise and shared repertoire. Power dynamics require management.</p>	<p>Wenger, 1998: 51.</p> <p>Halme, 2001; Handley et al., 2006; Jørgensen and Keller, 2008; Morrison et al., 2004; Wenger, 1998.</p> <p>Garavan et al., 2007; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998.</p>
Learning broker	<p>Active participation - supports learning and development; leverages learning opportunities.</p>	<p>Jørgensen and Keller, 2008; Wenger, 1998: 2000.</p>

Section 2: Community of Practice individual learning-related attributes

Individuals who participate in a CoP have certain traits which will influence their level of participation in a CoP/ LC and by extension will influence the learning of others. These individual attributes include learner autonomy, motivation and the learning preference of the micro firm O/M.

3.3.1 Learner autonomy

Holec (1981) was the first academic to propose a definition for autonomy. However, Holec's definition does not take into account the importance of action by an individual and therefore in the context of this research Holec's definition is incomplete. For the purpose of this study the researcher combines both Holec's (1981) and Lave and Wenger's (1991) portrayal of learner autonomy:

Learner autonomy relates to an individual '*tak[ing] charge of one's own learning*' (Holec, 1981: 3) as they negotiate resources with others in a CoP. In doing so the individual becomes more involved in practice and starts to reinterpret and reshape those resources which demonstrates learner autonomy (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Learning networks have been found to help O/Ms develop autonomy and collaborative learning strategies (Kelliher et al., 2009; Lesser and Everest, 2001; Morrison et al., 2004) to sustain longer-term learning. By participating in a learning network, micro firm O/Ms develop learning competencies that enable them to begin engaging in independent learning. In this context, a LC framework offers the potential for sustained learning in practice over the longer term (Morrison et al., 2004; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007).

Previous studies on facilitated networks (Florén and Tell, 2004; Halme, 2001; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011; Morrison et al., 2004) have recognised that when formal support for learning

comes to a conclusion, the individual needs to be able to engage in self-directed learning to transfer what has been learned into current practices (Man, 2006). From a learning perspective, an entrepreneur needs to be independent and have the ability to ‘learn in depth’ as entrepreneurial learning does not depend on the provision of formal training courses. It is in this context that a practice based approach to learning development is considered to be more successful when applied in micro firms (Florén and Tell, 2004; Halme, 2001; Morrison et al., 2004).

Foley et al. (2007) argue that a deeper level of learning is required for a micro-tourism O/M to take ownership of their learning, a view reinforced by Murphy et al. (2015) in the small firm context. However, this can be problematic as the O/M is faced with time constraints, which results in decisions being made on ambiguous foundations (Florén, 2003). In addition, careful consideration needs to be given to learning structures for O/Ms to take ownership of their learning as they learn by questioning and reflecting while taking action on real problems (Marsick and Watkins, 2001; Marquardt and Waddill, 2004).

3.3.2 Motivation

As noted previously, micro firm O/Ms have different motivations for maintaining their business than larger entities. In a tourism context, a number of studies have shown that many are motivated by a preferred lifestyle (Devins et al., 2005; Getz and Carlsen, 2005; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Mottiar, 2007). The individual business and lifestyle motivations of tourism micro firms influence the depth of involvement and forms of participation in LCs (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014) (see chapter four for further discussion). Although each individual will have a different motive for learning, Jones et al. (2010) argue an O/Ms motivation will have a significant influence on LC participation. Garavan and Ó’Cinnéde (1994) believe that the career of the small business O/M requires a number of competencies and functional knowledge. Hence, learning is required for micro firm sustainability in the long run. Additionally, the setting of goals by the O/M in a business can also be seen as a source of motivation (Locke and Latham, 2002). However, in the micro firm milieu, long-term learning goals tend not to be set as O/Ms focus on short-term

issues in their environment (Hill, 2004) due to the availability of limited resources, These motivations and individual values affect the micro firm O/Ms commitment to tourism/ rural business development and influence the way they communicate, behave and learn (von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003). Thus, the learning motivations and personal values of the micro firm O/M will also influence the learning style they adopt and therefore it is considered next.

3.3.3 Learning preference of the micro firm owner/ manager

Learning preference is defined as the particular mode of how individuals prefer to learn (Sadler-Smith et al., 2000). As referred to in chapter two, rural micro firm O/Ms are action orientated which suggests that they strongly prefer to focus on activity-based learning (Choueke and Armstrong, 1998). This style of learning can obstruct an individual's learning as they side step reflection (Garavan and Ó Cinnéide, 1994) and as a result it is unlikely that they will reach higher-level learning (Kelliher and Henderson, 2006). This can also be problematic in a LC environment as valuable contributions made by members to practice can be lost if action and reflection are not balanced (Florén and Tell, 2004; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011). O/Ms can also engage in action learning. Thorpe and Clarke (2008) argue that action learning allows O/Ms to disengage with their business activities and this gives them time to focus on long-term goals. This mode of learning can facilitate life-long learning according to Kearney and Zuber-Skeritt (2012).

The theoretical base of this study is the social learning perspective and argues that learning occurs in context, as members participate in the social world (Lave and Wenger, 1991). By participating in a CoP, rural tourism micro firm O/Ms can potentially overcome many of the difficulties they face such as resource constraints and the impact of a peripheral location on their business (Komppula, 2014; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003). As referred to in chapter two, rural tourism micro firm O/Ms learn as they pursue their business operations in interaction with others within and at times beyond their local community boundary in pursuit of sustainable tourism development (Halme, 2001; Meccheri and Pelloni, 2006; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). In doing so they participate in a variety of LC

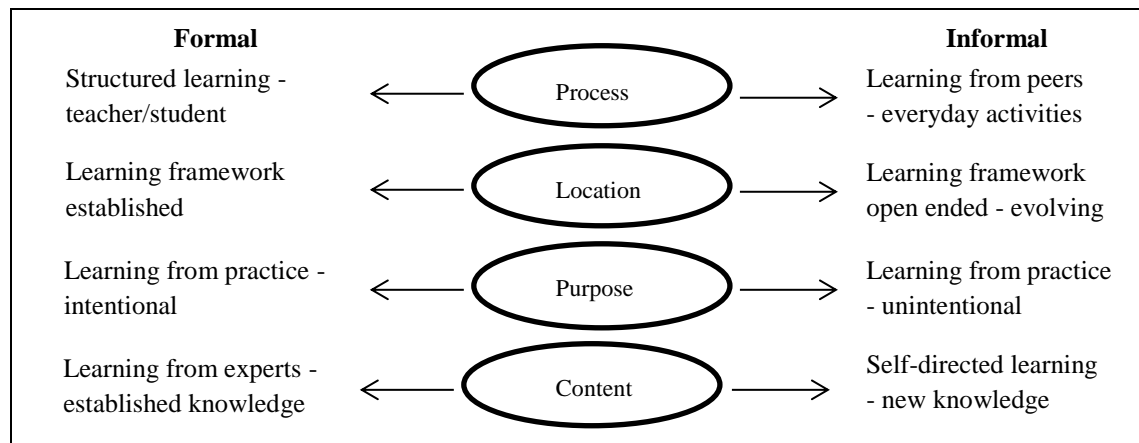
contexts, some can be considered more formal than others although it is important to note that the majority of learning contexts have both formal and informal dimensions. These LCs are contemplated now in this regard.

3.3.4 Formal and informal dimensions to learning

Malcolm et al. (2003) note it can be difficult to establish what formal, informal and non-formal learning is and what the boundaries are that exist between them. However, research has established that the boundaries and the relationships between formal and informal learning can vary and only be understood in specific contexts (Colley et al., 2002; Fuller-Love and Thomas, 2004; Malcolm et al., 2003).

Colley et al. (2002) outline four aspects of formality/ informality which can be utilised to identify if learning is formal or informal (see figure 3.1). They include (but are not limited to) process, location/ setting, purpose and content. Taking 'purpose' for example (as per figure 3.1 below), Malcolm et al. (2003) note if learning is the intentional outcome of an activity then it is classified as formal, whereas if learning has an unintentional outcome it is classified as being informal. Learning in micro firms can occur as much by accident as by design (as outlined in chapter two section 2.3.2), and hence illustrates that learning is often an unintentional outcome from everyday business activity as micro firms predominantly rely on informal learning (Matlay, 2000). This is consistent from an Irish perspective, as Birdthistle and Fleming (2005) note, learning opportunities occur in an informal setting in micro firms.

Figure 3.1: Formal versus Informal Learning



Adapted from Colley et al. (2002)

Colley et al. (2002) acknowledge that there are overlaps between formal and informal learning, and both forms exist together in the majority of learning contexts. For example, facilitated learning networks encompass both formal learning structures and purpose built informal learning strategies to facilitate collaborative learning (Hannon et al., 2000; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011). It is the blend of both formal and informal learning that is significant (Colley et al., 2002) in this setting.

Contemplating the research aim of this study which is *to explore the elements and relationships that influence learning in evolving learning communities in the micro firm rural tourism context*, the learning contexts relevant to this study are the rural tourism micro firm (as explored in chapter two and three), facilitated LCs and evolving LCs (as explored in chapter four). According to Wenger (1998: 215) '*learning entails both a process and a place*'. Therefore, as per table 3.5 below, the LC context (facilitated or evolving) in which micro firm O/Ms participate will influence the dimension (informal/formal) of how they learn individually and collectively.

Table 3.5: Micro Firm Learning Spaces

Context	Formal/ informal	Learning
Micro firm	Predominantly informal	Learning by doing; often unconscious
Facilitated LC	Both formal and informal dimensions (predominantly formal)	Facilitated collaborative learning – dedicated broker supports learning and practice
Independent and Evolving LCs	Predominantly informal (May have less formal learning strategies including training and knowledge dissemination for example)	Learning through the social interactions and relationships of community members

3.4 Relevance of social learning theory in a rural tourism micro firm context

From reviewing tourism learning network literature (Kelliher and Reinl, 2011; Komppula, 2004; Morrison et al., 2004; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Pavlovich, 2003; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007), tourism operators learn through interaction with others. When one considers the concept of practice within a tourism business community, it is clear that O/Ms complete their daily individual business operations while interacting with other tourism businesses in the pursuit of sustainable tourism development (Denicolai et al., 2010; Devins et al., 2005; Down, 1999; Gibb and Scott, 2001; Halme, 2001; Meccheri and Pelloni, 2006; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Shaw and Williams, 2009). As such, social learning theory has particular significance in a tourism context (Shaw and Williams, 2009).

As previously highlighted, rural tourism micro firms operate in a resource constrained environment and as a result they participate in practice and collaborate with their peers to overcome the resource difficulties they face from, for example, tourism seasonality (Tinsley and Lynch, 2007) and the impact of peripheral locations on their business (von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003). Micro firms frequently engage with one another within a community framework and as they do so a joint enterprise emerges (tourism development), and over time a shared repertoire to negotiate meaning (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), which will ultimately shape identities and practice in the LC.

As micro firm O/Ms participate in the practice of a LC they face learning barriers, which include a lack of stimulus for change, unequal emphasis on certain stages of the learning cycle (action/ reflection imbalance), insufficient support/ enabling structures and knowledge remains in tacit/ codified form and therefore cannot be embedded (Morris et al., 2006: 534). Another barrier to learning is referred to by Kelliher et al. (2014) where they note that micro firms can become locked into the learning that is produced within the community. Regardless, through sustained interaction micro firms can overcome these barriers, as they can leverage resources that would otherwise be unavailable to them from other participants (Chell and Baines, 2000; Florén, 2003) resulting in their competence being enhanced (Florén, 2003; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011). This is partially due to the

development of trust (Oliveira and Gama, 2013; Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012) and a sense of belonging between members as the learning relationship begins to stabilise between ‘newcomers’ and ‘old-timers’ (Wenger, 1998), reflecting Morrison et al.’s (2004) observation from a tourism perspective. However, a democratic structure is necessary to allow individuals to negotiate meaning and exchange core competencies in this environment (Komppula, 2004; McAreavey and McDonagh, 2011). This is where power dynamics come into play, as members will hold different positions and perspectives as they interact with others in a LC context (Jørgensen, 2007).

As outlined in table 3.4, as members of the tourism community participate in practice, learning occurs (Denicolai et al., 2010; Halme, 2001; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014) and this process is likely to be influenced by a range of motivations and resultant expectations (Getz and Carlsen, 2005; Marchant and Mottiar, 2010; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Mottiar, 2007; Reijonen and Komppula, 2007). For example, some LC members may want to increase tourism in the area while others only want to sustain it (McAreavey and McDonagh, 2011; Mottiar, 2007) so the landscape remains natural or that their own peaceful lifestyle is maintained. Hence, some members may choose to take a less active learning role (Florén, 2003; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Jørgensen, 2007) or only participate in activities which serve their individual motivations (Reinl, 2011). This approach may result in community level learning being hindered, as less active members fail to meet and understand requests for their contribution to the wider community as they do not frequently participate in practice and dialogue (Wenger, 1998) or choose not to participate in/ support those activities which do not align with their own goals (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014) (as per section 3.2.2.1).

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter contemplated the four main orientations to learning (behaviourist, cognitivist, humanist, social and situational). The researcher concluded that the most appropriate orientation is the social and situational perspective (Lave and Wenger, 1991) due to the importance of social participation within a community framework for micro firm O/M learning to occur. The chapter considered learning dynamics in the rural tourism micro firm context, highlighting the trajectory of learning in a CoP and the dynamics and influencers of identity construction through participation in practice. Various forms of participation were considered, as was the concept of shared meaning. Learner autonomy, motivation and the learning preference of the micro firm O/M were contemplated, as were the formal and informal dimensions of learning in a CoP environment. It was found that micro firm learning activities were primarily informal in nature.

Given the resource constraints micro firms face in their environment (as outlined in chapter two) and that they do not and cannot pursue sustainable development in isolation (Florén and Tell, 2004; Fuller-Love and Thomas, 2004; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003), it is important that cooperative relationships are built between this cohort which can enable progressive learning development over time. Brouder and Eriksson (2013) believe that learning by tourism micro firm O/Ms is on-going and that they will all bring their own set of skills and experiences to the LC. Therefore, learning in practice will be influenced by shared histories of learning from prior engagement (Florén and Tell, 2004; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011; Wenger, 1998). If members of the tourism community have a history of learning with each other then it is more likely that they will participate in practice, and display a deep depth of involvement. This is partially because trust is built between members through sustained interaction as they participate in practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Recent research in the tourism field has shifted away from ‘static / didactic approaches’ to tourism development to more ‘dynamic approaches’, which build on the social learning dynamics of networks (Denicolai et al., 2010; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). One such method

of prior engagement that has witnessed substantial government support, particularly in a micro firm context, is facilitated learning networks (Halme, 2001; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011; Morris et al., 2006; Morrison et al., 2004; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007). However, despite considerable investment, little is known about micro firm LCs, whether they exist as an independent entity throughout their history or are sustained after facilitated network activities end (Kelliher and Reinl, 2014). Thus, exploration of LCs and their potential impact in assisting micro firm O/Ms to sustain an independent LC environment is important and therefore will be explored in the following chapter.

Chapter Four

Micro Firm Learning Community

4.0 Chapter overview

As discussed in chapter three, a number of micro firm learning communities (LCs) are exhibited in the micro firm learning and networks literature which vary along dimensions of learning formality. Those LCs most relevant in the context of this research are facilitated LCs (for example learning networks/ networks) and independent LCs (for example practitioner led networks which are not formally facilitated).

In reality much of tourism practice occurs within and between a myriad of networks however drawing on a body of relevant literature, the chapter begins by defining a micro firm LC (see section 4.1 below). Following this a facilitated LC is defined and it is noted that this environment is often the catalyst for the establishment of a sustainable independent LC in the longer term. An independent LC relates to a group of businesses (micro firms) who collaborate with one another in their community for the purpose of tourism development and in doing so they build shared meaning and learn in practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). While an evolving LC is similar to an independent LC in many respects, the key difference is that an evolving environment relates to any community that is developing from one stage of evolution to another for example, facilitated to independent or vice versa.

The transition from facilitated to independent LC is challenging from a learning perspective for micro firm practitioners and this evolution of the LC is discussed in the context of learning; specifically, the instigation and development of the role of a broker in that process. The characteristics/ behaviours necessary to effectively manage and sustain an independent micro firm LC are outlined. Given the community of practice and learning community focus on this research, the concept of ‘the learning set’ is explored as a social

structure of learning for the micro firm owner/ manager (O/M). The emergent criteria inform the conceptual evolving LC model (see figure 4.1).

4.1 Micro firm learning communities

Tourism micro firms engage in a number of different LCs and these include learning networks, business networks, other formal training courses and informal networks. The learning focus of these LCs will vary from one to the other. For example, learning networks are defined as '*a network formally set up for the primary purpose of increasing knowledge*' (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001: 88) and can be facilitated or unfacilitated, whereas an informal network will not have an explicit learning objective (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Marsden et al., 2010; Valkering et al., 2013). Before addressing the value of these collaborative LCs to individual business, community and regional development, the key components of a micro firm LC are outlined. Similarities between the facilitated and unfacilitated LCs are explored and differences which distinguish them are sought.

The concept of a LC assumes that learning occurs within a community of practice and that it is ongoing and continuously evolving (Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). Membership is dynamic and LC members will have various competencies which help them to overcome learning barriers and leverage resources (Chell and Baines, 2000; Florén, 2003) to support learning (Håkansson et al., 1999). In each LC context (facilitated or unfacilitated), participants work together in the pursuit of shared goals, and learn not only for themselves but also for the common good of other community members (Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). According to Morrison et al. (2004) collaborative learning and the resultant knowledge exchange amongst members acts as a glue that binds a LC together as it can '*potentially address cultural blocks to the development of effective management and strategic capabilities*' (Kelliher et al., 2009: 93) within and among tourism firms. Ultimately, at its core, a '*sense of community and collective common good*' (Heidari et al., 2014: 281) underpins practice. Therefore, a long term perspective should be taken with regard to these relationships for learning development to be nurtured (Jämsä et al., 2011) as it takes time for higher level learning opportunities to be developed in a LC (Florén and Tell, 2004). Similarly, trust needs to be built over time in a LC to allow collaboration to take place between micro firms (Florén and Tell, 2004; Morrison et al., 2004) and to permit deeper learning to occur (Håkansson et al., 1999). Shaw and Williams (2009) suggest that the proximity of micro firms in a local tourism community can determine the degree of knowledge sharing between members.

Collaborative strategies such as learning set configuration and broker support can be utilised by members in a LC environment to negotiate meaning and as they do so trust builds and relationships begin to stabilise amongst them (Heidari et al., 2014; Lave and Wenger, 1991) resulting in higher level learning (Valkering et al., 2013). Learning sets consist of six-eight members (micro firms/ other rural tourism development stakeholders) and act as a social space where they can interact with others to share ideas and resources to develop their business (Devins et al., 2005). A broker is an individual who assists members in the LC to generate ideas and encourages them to evaluate opportunities in their own time (Jack et al., 2010). Ideally, the long term goal of an LC should include self-led learning, where the development of relationships facilitate *‘both internal shared meaning and boundary fluidity in pursuit of evolutionary learning strategies and sustainable community benefit’* (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014: 120). In this context, the ability to learn autonomously and the creation of self-developed leadership that guides rather than controls members is crucial to LC evolution (Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). Given the above components, the following micro firm LC definition is utilised for this study:

A socially constructed learning environment that enhances individual learning and business development through cooperative learning strategies that facilitate learning relationship development, resource sharing and learner autonomy.

(Reinl and Kelliher, 2010: 142)

A LC may emerge organically from within the rural tourism community itself, or, under a facilitated network catalyst (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001). As noted in the previous chapter, governments are becoming increasingly aware of the benefits of facilitating micro firm LCs as they recognise that facilitation is the catalyst for sustainable independent LCs in the longer term (Halme, 2001; Heidari et al., 2014; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011; Morris et al., 2006; Morrison et al., 2004; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007). Further, recent research has acknowledged that facilitation can lead to innovative ways of enhancing collaborative learning amongst businesses as social and cultural ties are strengthened in communities (Nieminen and Lemmetyinen, 2015). In addition, through engaging in facilitated LCs micro firms can develop relational capabilities (Heidari et al., 2014) and alleviate barriers to learning and knowledge exchange (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001) resulting in a competitive advantage for these firms (Kelliher and Reinl, 2011). The latter highlights the

value of facilitated intervention/ support in pursuit of progressive learning development in tourism LCs. These facilitated LCs are explored next.

4.1.1 A facilitated learning community

The network literature focuses on a variety of facilitated LC settings, typically these are academe-led networks (Florén and Tell, 2004; Halme, 2001; Morrison et al., 2004; Foley et al., 2006 among others) and/ or tourism support organisation-led networks (Beaumont and Dredge, 2010; Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003). A facilitated network is a formal environment that supports and enhances effective social relationships amongst members through utilising collaborative strategies (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Jämsä et al., 2011; Morrison et al., 2004; Valkering et al., 2013). These collaborative strategies will differ in each network (academe-led versus a tourism support organisation-led network). In an academe-led network, collaborative strategies will comprise an underlying learning component, whereas in a tourism support organisation-led network the focus may be action orientated with little focus on learning (as per the above literature). Therefore, if the primary focus of collaborative strategies is on action and/ or knowledge exchange as opposed to learning, the development of autonomous learning relationships will be more difficult and therefore the sustainability of an independent LC may be impeded in the future.

There are many references to brokerage in the tourism and learning literature. For example, the knowledge broker is a key individual that '*champion[s] the 'public good serving...various interests...beyond the commercial sphere'*' (Lemmetyinen and Go, 2009: 31) and is more knowledge exchange focused, while a learning broker is a key individual that supports learning and practice between LC stakeholders and assists with overcoming dynamic stakeholder interests (Florén and Tell, 2004; Halme, 2001; Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Valkering et al., 2013). Although the main approach adopted by each broker in facilitating a LC will differ, the attributes, traits and behaviours demonstrated by the knowledge broker often equate to those associated with the learning broker role, albeit they are likely to be in tacit form. The ethos of each facilitated LC brokering approach is to

encourage and embed social relationships amongst members and as this occurs mutual opportunities arise from the negotiation of differences which will enhance the sustainability of an independent tourism community (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Pavlovich, 2003; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007).

The collaborative strategies (including learning) applied in a facilitated LC will be determined by those individuals who drive the LC and as noted above these individuals' broker learning and practice to varying degrees (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Valkering et al., 2013). Levin (1993) argues that when the catalyst for collaboration originates from the public sector, this sector should assume a network broker role because it is more likely that they will have the necessary resources available to them to sustain learning development. These facilitated LC arenas are explored next with regard to the broker concept and learning set configuration.

4.1.1.1 Brokerage across boundaries

The tourism networks literature (Halme, 2001; Jack et al., 2010; Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Valkering et al., 2013) acknowledges that sustainable tourism development is enhanced as both the public and private sectors collaborate and work together (Andersson and Getz, 2009; d'Angella et al., 2010; Halme and Fadeeva, 2000; Timur and Getz, 2008; Vernon et al., 2005). The value of the broker in bridging the public and private sector is further supported in a rural tourism context (Polo and Frías, 2010). This reflects the shift from government to governance; how governments employ tourism policies of late based on bottom-up involvement with inclusive stakeholder engagement (Dredge, 2006; Vernon et al., 2005). According to Saxena (2005) this interdependency between public and private entities is the beginning of a cooperative structure. In order for a cooperative structure to be maintained in the longer term the broker is required to understand that economic and social considerations need to be carefully balanced (Gibson et al., 2005; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007) in the practice of tourism development. As referred to in chapter two (see section 2.1), this is particularly important in attempting to strengthen relationships in a rural context as micro firms operate in close 'spatial fixity' (von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003) where community politics and the varying business motivations

(lifestyle versus growth) will require consideration and negotiation (Jaouen and Lasch, 2015). Thus, the value of the facilitated environment in this context is that it supports joint learning amongst diverse stakeholders in the pursuit of sustaining an independent tourism LC (Valkering et al., 2013). In addition, a cooperative structure (between the public and private sector) will encourage a ‘cascade effect’ as learning spreads amongst community members and they begin to take control of their future practice together (Kearney and Zuber-Skeritt, 2012).

Individual brokers (from academia/ tourism support circles) will display broker traits of varying value for LC sustainability. The tourism learning network literature (Halme, 2001; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011; Morrison et al., 2004) acknowledges that relationships and learning interventions can be managed by academia in a facilitated learning environment. Key learning stakeholders in an academic led network fulfil the role of a broker (Kelliher and Reinl, 2011; Morrison et al., 2004) with a primary learning focus (Florén and Tell, 2004; Kelliher et al., 2009). The broker in this environment (as discussed in section 3.2.2.2.3 and repeated here for clarity) provides leadership in the network facilitating collaborative learning relationships amongst members (Halme, 2001) via the learning set (Nieminen and Lemmetyinen, 2015). They act as a neutral player to effectively establish an ethos of trust necessary to support sustainable learning relationships (Florén and Tell, 2004; Halme, 2001; Morrison et al., 2004). The broker facilitates learning among community members by developing their learning competence (Florén, 2003; Jämsä et al., 2011; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011; Lave and Wenger, 1991), encouraging reflection (Florén and Tell, 2004; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011) and leveraging learning opportunities from peers and other tourism/ business development stakeholders (Johannisson, 2000).

In contrast to the broker found in an academic-led network, a broker originating from tourism support circles may be more action and / or knowledge exchange focused (as noted above) and concentrate mainly on information sharing (Gibson et al., 2005; Lemmetyinen and Go, 2009) which raises issues with regard to the sustainability of a independent micro firm LC. However, despite the aforementioned difference in brokering approach, the goal of each broker (in an academe-led or tourism support organisation-led network) is to strengthen social relationships amongst members so that a micro firm LC can be sustained

in the future (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Nieminen and Lemmetyinen, 2015; Valkering et al., 2013). In doing this, in both contexts, certain attributes are considered effective in brokering a micro firm LC and these include being energetic, enthusiastic and being capable of providing a rounded approach to member development (Gibb, 1997; Nieminen and Lemmetyinen, 2015), encouraging the development of leadership skills in others (Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014) and should facilitate the LC rather than being a controller engaging in ‘expert consultancy’ (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Nieminen and Lemmetyinen, 2015).

Taking a tourism support organisation-led network, the Local Tourist Organisation (LTO) may assume a broker position within local tourism communities (Beaumont and Dredge, 2010; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003). When the broker originates from the LTO domain it demonstrates vision and leadership on the public sectors part as they are seen to be taking a more active role in tourism destination management and planning according to Beaumont and Dredge (2010). Here it is important that rural micro firm O/Ms have a say in influencing destination development with regard to future support and sustainability of tourism community projects (von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003). In this context, the broker will act as a tourism development champion assuming responsibilities which tie closely with the attributes, traits and behaviours associated with the learning broker role, engaging themselves and others in a range of tourism development activities including for example; the production of visitor guides, the development and establishment of a brand (Beaumont and Dredge, 2010) and the coordination of individual tourism businesses in that pursuit (De Bruyn and Fernández Alonso, 2012: 236-237). Assuming a leadership role (Morrison, 2013) these individuals assist and inspire others by encouraging open communication amongst members, thereby embedding a collaborative ethos (Beaumont and Dredge, 2010) in the LC. This can lead to a competitive advantage for the destination as all components of the tourism chain can be managed successfully (von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003) as leadership is established and coordinated (Bornhorst et al., 2010), and trust and buy-in from the rural tourism business community is established. Here, the encouragement of peer discussion and resultant negotiation is significant in enhancing individual learning within a CoP (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Taking a longer term perspective and contemplating rural micro firm learning criteria discussed in chapter two without the development of learner autonomy the sustainability of tourism LCs may be problematic in the longer term.

In reality a LC is frequently a hybrid of the above (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001), in that the micro firms who collaborate in pursuit of local tourism development practice are supported by numerous stakeholders over time, who demonstrate leadership and perform aspects of the broker role, for example local government authorities, LTOs, Chambers of Commerce amongst others. Hence within an independent LC setting stakeholder roles are likely to be indistinct, as broker functions are conducted by numerous individuals from various public/ private spheres (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001: 90) where each stakeholder will have their own agenda and focus.

4.1.1.2 The learning set concept

In a facilitated micro firm LC, learning sets comprise a broker to provide expertise (as per Devins et al., 2005) and they offer a collaborative space of opportunity (Nieminen and Lemmetyinen, 2015) within the LC. The learning set in a facilitated environment constitutes an informal element and offers a platform where complex issues can be addressed as O/Ms explore practices in a real life context with others who operate in a similar field (Gibb, 2011; McCarthy et al., 2006). This is particularly important considering rural micro firm O/Ms prefer to run lifestyle over growth orientated businesses (Jaouen and Lasch, 2015; Kearney et al., 2014) and that they need to be able to associate learning to the context it was created in for them to understand, relate to (Brouder and Eriksson, 2013; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Man, 2007) and ‘cascade’ it to other members (Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). Therefore, considering the latter, ‘two way communication’ is essential for collaboration to occur (Halme, 2001) and it can also lead to the mobilisation of rich tacit knowledge (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001) which can further enhance the likelihood of set members becoming autonomous learners in the future (Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). This preference is well served by ‘situated learning’ (see chapter three, section 3.2.1), a core concept of Lave and Wenger’s (1991) social learning theory.

The learning set can assist the broker in defining their role (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001) and enabling interactions to take place (Jämsä et al., 2011; Valkering et al. 2013) in the

pursuit of strengthening social bonds amongst members (Jämsä et al., 2011) and in turn, promoting higher level learning. For this to happen, the broker needs to moderate the roles and contributions of LC stakeholders (Kelliher et al., 2014) regardless of a tacit or implicit learning focus. It is important that the broker has an understanding of how micro firm O/Ms learn (Crick, 2011) to be effective in brokering a learning set (Devins et al., 2005; Halme, 2001; Matlay, 1999), and they must also be aware of what triggers micro firm O/M learning for example, previous business success, failure, experiences or changes in the external environment (Cope and Watts, 2000; Crick, 2011; Halme, 2001; Jämsä et al., 2011), which can be difficult for an action focused broker. In addition, as a broker usually originates from the public sector and thus operates in a formal environment; it is essential they avoid a top-down approach (Tinsley and Lynch, 2007) when brokering a LC set (Halme, 2001) as this can impede the transfer of information/ knowledge amongst tourism community members (Heidari et al., 2014) and hence stall the development of self-directed learning as a result (Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). Thus, the value of the broker in encouraging a bottom-up approach to learning is highlighted, as knowledge creation as opposed to consumption is supported when social engagement amongst members is encouraged (Valkering et al., 2013).

Cooperation and communication channels utilised by the broker are effective in encouraging stakeholder collaboration through set engagement (Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012) as support is practical in nature, which is the preferred approach to learning and development by micro firms (as previously noted in section 2.3.1.1). In doing so, as trust builds over time, the broker encourages learner autonomy, reflection and the sharing of ideas and knowledge between participants on how they can continue to work together into the practice of tourism development. Therefore, the learning set is the impetus to self-developed leadership (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012) where micro firm O/Ms can begin to leverage knowledge and sustain independent LC activity.

Within the learning set, the telling of stories (Kelliher et al., 2009) regarding the challenges and success of businesses can be utilised by the wider LC. These stories are essential to building strong identities that members can relate to and as they do so begin to understand

the values of the LC (Lemmetyinen and Go, 2009) by developing meaning and value personally. Other resources that the facilitated broker can utilise in the set include benchmarking against other LC's (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Valkering et al., 2013), interactive websites, newsletters and learning materials (Kelliher et al., 2009; Tell, 2000). These activities can act as 'artefacts' (seeding structures) to support joint learning (Valkering et al., 2013) and are necessary for skills and knowledge to be transferred and embedded in an independent environment (Marsden et al., 2010). Marsick and Watkins (2001) argue that by taking action and reflecting on the impact of these activities in the learning set, learning can occur, as participants/ learners think more strategically about their learning needs (Devins et al., 2005; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004). As a result, members can *learn how to learn* and develop leadership skills such as influencing abilities and being capable of understanding issues more clearly (Marsick and Watkins, 2001). Therefore, the learning set arena stimulates the development of social relationships with peers (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Florén, 2003; Jämsä et al., 2011) as they negotiate resources and thus experiences can be shared, potentially leading to the alleviation of LC barriers (Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). Before considering the challenges to autonomous learning in a network setting, the value of collaborative learning to micro firms and regional/ community development is outlined.

4.2 Value of collaborative learning to micro firms and regional development

Tourism micro firms are the backbone of economic growth, competitiveness and employment in rural economies (Brouder and Eriksson, 2013; Komppula, 2004; Perren, 1999; Phillipson et al., 2004; Siemens, 2015) while also having a role in sustaining communities in non-monetary ways (Brouder and Eriksson, 2013). This is evident in a report produced by the European Commission (2013) where it is noted that employment created by micro firms was close to one third of total employment in the EU (see chapter two, section 2.2), these firms are predominantly rural and operate in the tourism sector (von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003). Therefore, given the importance of tourism micro firms to rural economies and that there has been a paucity of studies focusing on learning interactions amongst these businesses (Alonso and Bressan, 2014; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014), individual/ collective micro firm benefits to LC participation are considered next before detailing regional/ community development benefits.

4.2.1 Individual benefits to learning community participation

A network has a number of different functions including but not limited to marketing, development and information transfer. The latter function permits micro firm O/Ms to leverage otherwise unavailable information and resources that can assist with overcoming market challenges such as increased competition (Ahmad, 2005; Gill and Biger, 2012; Schaper et al., 2005; Siemens, 2010). It is the interaction between members in a LC that provides the context for learning and knowledge exchange (Halme, 2001). This co-participation in the LC and resultant relationships facilitates micro firm O/M learning and decision making as they acquire skills and knowledge from beyond the micro firm (Down, 1999; Taylor and Thorpe, 2004). It is in this social learning context that knowledge sharing will be based on norms and shared rules, which is consistent with social learning theorists (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991). In addition, knowledge sharing will be influenced by the degree to which it is embedded in the learning structure and roles of individuals in the community, and may only be shared if mutual agreement is reached among individual tourism businesses (Halme, 2001).

Bessant and Tsekouras (2001) acknowledge that a variety of different networks exist in reality. The learning network is primarily focused on learning and knowledge exchange (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001) and can be facilitated by a broker (see section 4.1.1). The facilitated learning network can offer a dynamic and resource rich learning environment (Kelliher et al., 2009; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011), where firm growth can '*mirror the dynamics of learning*' (Dobbs and Hamilton, 2007: 299). The learning network is considered in this study because in essence it embeds a 'LC' ethos in individuals and amongst LC members.

A number of studies demonstrate the value of learning networks for tourism micro firms (Ahlström-Söderling, 2003; Ahmad, 2005; Florén and Tell, 2004; Fuller-Love and Thomas, 2004; Morrison et al., 2004; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007), which is also the case in a rural context (Halme, 2001; Pavlovich, 2003; Reinl and Kelliher, 2010). As rural tourism micro firms engage in this setting their competence is enhanced (Chell and Baines, 2000; Florén, 2003; Reinl and Kelliher, 2010) as they build shared meaning and learn together in the practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) of tourism development. Over time, as a cooperative LC ethos is embedded amongst micro firm O/Ms, they can overcome many of the difficulties they face from both their internal and external environments (as noted in chapter two) and develop new perspectives stimulating a positive learning environment according to Florén (2003), which is an essential prerequisite for learning.

Whether facilitated or unfacilitated, LCs provide a number of benefits to tourism micro firm O/Ms including the development of their social needs and the ability to become autonomous learners to sustain an independent LC.

4.2.1.1 Development of social needs

Through engaging in a LC, firms can leverage resources and capabilities from relationships with other members (Chaston and Mangles, 2000; Heidari et al., 2014). Through interactions with like-minded people in a LC setting, individual micro firms begin to

develop their social needs⁸ (Jack et al., 2010) and as a consequence learning occurs, resulting in a boost in confidence (Florén and Tell; 2004; Kelliher et al., 2014) and morale for those individual micro firms. As a result, micro firm O/Ms begin to develop core competences such as managerial skills, which are necessary to overcome the challenges they face from their evolving environments (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001).

A LC can facilitate an individual's learning development (Clarke et al., 2006; Morrison et al., 2004; Taylor and Thorpe, 2004) which is measurable and observable through skills, attributes and behaviours which demonstrate the effectiveness of competence in the learning role (Man, 2007). The LC environment can assist micro firms with developing their capability to learn which is critical for survival, given they operate in a dynamic environment (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Kearney et al., 2014; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004). Thus, through engaging in collaborative LC's the importance of learning from peers is highlighted for micro firms, which is consistent with the theoretical base of this research (as noted in chapter three, section 3.4).

Collaboration between rural tourism businesses in a LC context can assist individual micro firms with overcoming feelings of isolation (Jack et al., 2010) which are amplified in a rural setting. This latter argument is particularly important as micro firms cannot and do not pursue sustainable development in isolation (Florén and Tell, 2004; Fuller-Love and Thomas, 2004; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003), and therefore collaborations with other tourism/ rural development stakeholders are considered pivotal to successful rural tourism development (Halme, 2001; Heidari et al., 2014; Pavlovich, 2003). It is in this context that micro firms feel a sense of belonging; that they have a voice (Fuller-love and Thomas, 2004) in contributing to important issues affecting the LC. If this is the case, LCs can act as a strategic tool to improve rural business performance and hence determine survival for micro firms operating on the periphery (Fuller-love and Thomas, 2004).

⁸ Social needs relate to the development of belongingness and acceptance as individuals forge relationships with other members in the network.

4.2.1.2 Learner autonomy

The core objective of a LC is learner autonomy, where participants can sustain co-operative learning and practice resulting in business development opportunities (Lesser and Everest, 2001; Morrison et al., 2004; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007). As noted in section 4.1.1.1 above, in the pursuit of learner autonomy it is important that the broker in the facilitated setting encourages the development of social relationships as it is through these relationships that individuals will develop their learning competence (Florén, 2003; Jämsä et al., 2011; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011; Lave and Wenger, 1991). LCs must entail a reflexive function according to Florén (2003) which can lead to higher level learning as micro firm O/Ms begin to question their previously held ideas and assumptions through the development of trust amongst network members resulting in the creation of new perceptions on different issues (Florén and Tell, 2004). The learning set (as discussed in section 4.1.1.2 above) facilitates this through the development of self-directed leadership of individuals as LC practice is negotiated in the context of the wider community (Lave and Wenger, 1991). However, Florén (2003) notes that higher level learning can be impeded in a micro firm context as it can be difficult for this cohort to ‘unlearn’ such assumptions as barriers to learning are embedded at O/M level in these firms (Kearney et al., 2014). In this context, Florén and Tell (2004) argue knowledge exchange is a critical element of O/M learning.

4.2.2 Community/ regional development benefits of collaboration

The value of collaboration to the development of rural communities has been emphasised in the micro firm literature (Komppula, 2004; Perren, 1999; Phillipson et al., 2004; Reijonen and Komppula, 2007) as collaboration can lead to employment being created and economic growth being enhanced. In addition, collaborations bridge the gap between the public and private sector thereby combating feelings of isolation/ distance that both sectors have traditionally felt (Halme, 2001). Multi-level / multi-sector stakeholder knowledge can lead to positive commercial and community outcomes (Gibson et al., 2005; Kelliher et al., 2014). For example, in a study conducted by Valkering et al. (2013) the public and private sector work together for ‘collective innovation’ as they aim to achieve sustainable

community development within a community of practice framework (Wenger, 1998). However, it is important to acknowledge that differences in perspectives and interests amongst the sectors can limit the development of opportunities (Gibson et al., 2005; Halme, 2001).

Collaboration amongst tourism micro firms/ other rural development stakeholders can instil an ethos of trust and commitment in the community (Florén and Tell, 2004) which will minimise the risk of knowledge hoarding that can occur within local LCs. If this is the case it is less likely that the sharing of information and ideas amongst stakeholders will be curtailed due to community politics, O/M attitude, fear of losing competitive advantage and peers using information as a power advantage (Jørgensen, 2007; Kelliher et al., 2014). Thus, as members work together in a CoP (Lave and Wenger, 1991) the reciprocity of ideas amongst stakeholders is important (Jack et al., 2010) for the sustainable development of the local community to be maintained in the longer term.

The facilitated environment offers micro firms an avenue for change in that as they develop social relationships with other stakeholders in the community their learning competence is enhanced, which will assist in sustaining an independent LC (Jämsä et al., 2011; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011; Lave and Wenger, 1991). This is a critical stage in the evolution of communities, and according to Lemmetyinen and Go (2009) sustainability is determined by the capacity of a LC to manage independently in the absence of facilitated support. In contemplating this challenge, we need to understand the value of facilitated network strategies to rural micro firms (as outlined above) and how those strategies might evolve in a setting independent of focused network support.

4.3 Challenges to autonomous learning

In the CoP literature, formal structures of learning are somewhat disregarded (Brown and Duguid, 1991) even though micro firm research has demonstrated the value of blending both formal and informal learning strategies for independent LC sustainability. These suggest that certain facilitated strategies are required (Halme, 2001; Morrison et al., 2004; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014) to support learning competence and instil a sense of community amongst LC members (Kelliher and Reinl, 2011). However a key challenge in creating a sustainable independent LC is learned helplessness (Candy, 1987; Sadler-Smith et al., 2000) which refers to an over reliance by micro firm O/Ms on training providers for learning support (Reinl and Kelliher, 2010) counteracting the promotion of learner autonomy and hence the successful formation of an independent LC (Cope and Watts, 2000). Learned helplessness may be amplified in an independent LC context as it can be difficult for micro firm O/Ms to challenge and unlearn previously held assumptions and beliefs (Florén, 2003). Therefore, it is important that the LC broker encourages a self-reliance culture, diverse skill-set (Halme, 2001) and the transfer of generic/ informal skills amongst members to ensure that support is balanced and learning momentum can be maintained beyond the life of a single broker's contribution (Reinl and Kelliher, 2010). Based on the preceding catalogue of characteristics; the term learned helplessness is widened to encompass the concept of denied or passive learning barriers in this research.

4.4 Facilitated rural micro firm learning communities: emergent themes

Collectively, the above criteria can contribute to a sustainable LC environment and they are tabulated below (see table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Facilitated Rural Micro Firm Learning Communities: Emergent Themes

Key Facilitated LC themes	Description	Supporting literature
Catalyst for collaboration	<p>Learner autonomy; enhance resource and capability development - to ensure sustainable community development;</p> <p>Overcome: Learning barriers, knowledge boundaries and market challenges for competitiveness and innovation.</p>	<p>Chell and Baines, 2000; Halme, 2001; Jämsä et al., 2011; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011; Morris et al., 2006; Morrison et al., 2004; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007.</p> <p>Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Heidari et al., 2014; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011; Nieminen and Lemmetyinen, 2015; Valkering et al., 2013.</p>
Relationships	<p>Formalised through network participation, practice based learning; facilitated peer learning relationships;</p> <p>Trust needs to be built and shared over time; balance economic and social considerations - to stabilise/ strengthen learning relationships.</p>	<p>Florén and Tell, 2004; Florén, 2003; Gibb, 2011; Halme, 2001; Morrison, 2014.</p> <p>Florén and Tell, 2004; Gibson et al., 2005; Jämsä et al., 2011; Kelliher et al., 2009; Morrison et al., 2004; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007; Valkering et al., 2013.</p>
Strategies	<p>LC broker: Can originate from numerous circles, consequently supports collaborative learning and practice to varying degrees between network stakeholders - action versus learning focus;</p> <p>Value of learning sets established - understand, relate and cascade learning to other LC members - tacit knowledge mobilised - reflection/ action encouraged.</p>	<p>Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Beaumont and Dredge, 2010; Dredge, 2006; Florén and Tell, 2004; Halme, 2001; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011; Morrison et al., 2004; Valkering et al., 2013; Von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003.</p> <p>Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Devins et al., 2005; Florén, 2003; Jämsä et al., 2011; Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Kelliher and Reinl, 2010; Marsick and Watkins; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004.</p>
Resources	<p>Resource rich learning environment - can lead to network provider dependence;</p> <p>Important facilitated ‘artefacts’ (stories, benchmarking, interactive websites, newsletters and learning materials) stimulate peer learning and encourage autonomous learning and practice.</p>	<p>Dobbs and Hamilton, 2007; Kelliher et al., 2009; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011.</p> <p>Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Marsden et al., 2010; Morrison et al., 2004; Kelliher et al., 2009; Tell, 2000; Valkering et al., 2013.</p>
Learning development	<p>Develops in social practice of the LC;</p> <p>-Nurtured by the broker by encouraging the development of social relationships via the learning set - as members negotiate opportunities/ issues self-directed leadership is encouraged as social bonds strengthen amongst members.</p>	<p>Lave and Wenger, 1991; Jämsä et al., 2011; Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Nieminen and Lemmetyinen, 2015; Valkering et al. 2013.</p>
Sustainability	<p>Broker emphasis:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Leadership developer -Co-creator of learning -Learner autonomy to sustain practice -Promotes joint learning. 	<p>Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Nieminen and Lemmetyinen, 2015; Valkering et al., 2013.</p>

It is evident from table 4.1 above that certain strategies and broker to LC interrelations support the evolution of an independent LC (Halme, 2001; Morrison et al., 2004; Reinl and Kelliher, 2010). As a cooperative learning ethos becomes embedded in the LC, the facilitated environment is seen by community members as an avenue to autonomous learning, in that they can begin to learn through the relationships and social structures in the community (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Value established in the learning set ensures the learning momentum is sustained in the longer term (Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Nieminen and Lemmetyinen, 2015). If this is the case a LC should be able to sustain the easing of more formal learning structures (Uzzi, 1997) as micro firm O/Ms acquire competence (Man, 2007).

Over time as trust builds and social relationships begin to stabilise (Florén and Tell, 2004; Kelliher et al., 2009; Morrison et al., 2004; Valkering et al., 2013) (see table 4.1), effective learning can occur with other tourism micro firms (Heidari et al, 2014; Jack et al., 2010) in an independent setting. Ultimately, the development of these cooperative relationships permits learning across knowledge boundaries as the exchange of knowledge ‘*and innovation occurs in a more self-organised and autonomous way*’ (Valkering et al., 2013: 87).

4.5 The role of the broker in an independent learning community

The facilitated broker is critical in nurturing and embedding core relationships in the LC (Jack et al., 2010; Nieminen and Lemmetyinen, 2015; Valkering et al., 2013) and plays a crucial role in this transition (Jack et al., 2010; Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Lemmetyinen and Go, 2009; Marsden et al., 2010) supporting leadership capacity as LC goals and roles are negotiated (Wenger, 1998). This is referred to as ‘handholding’ in the literature (Waligo et al., 2013), but is labelled broker support in this study. Broker support facilitates the passing of the leadership baton to the local rural tourism broker in recognition that a functioning LC requires structure and effective leadership (Gibb, 1997) but also requires phased autonomy among LC members in order to counteract denied or passive learning (see glossary of terms for definition) and sustain independent learning in practice over the longer term (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). It follows that guidance is necessary for members at the initial stages of independent LC formation as is broker replenishment in the interim to promote participation and in the longer term to avoid broker/ leadership burn-out (Marsden et al., 2010; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). Broker value should be visible to participating micro firms (Wenger, 2006).

The local rural tourism broker is pivotal to the operation and sustainability of an independent LC wherein many individuals can display various traits of the broker role (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). These individuals, often referred to as network champions provide guidance and expertise at the initial stages of LC formation to members of the local tourism community (Lesser and Everest, 2001; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). If the broker is selected from within the community, then the issue of trust as a barrier to learning in practice can be minimised as shared meaning is more easily established with LC members (Florén and Tell, 2004). Wenger (2006) argues that community members may not distinguish the contribution a broker from within the community adds to their collaboration efforts. However, the broker has a number of important functions to play including managing the diverse stakeholder perspectives that are often associated with rural tourism development (Timur and Getz, 2008; Waligo et al., 2013).

The broker will also have a role in providing administrative and communicative functions (Marsden et al., 2010; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014) to LC members. Potentially, this can lead to a number of benefits including increased interaction and a resultant boost in the motivation of LC members (Waligo et al., 2013) as the workload is shared and all members are encouraged to get involved in LC activities (Fuller-Love and Thomas, 2004; Jack et al., 2010). An effective communication strategy supported by the broker can nurture the development of shared meaning and a sense of understanding and awareness between members (Waligo et al., 2013) and in this context the learning set can also be adopted (Marsden et al., 2010) in an evolving LC. It is important to acknowledge that the intention of the learning set in this environment may be the completion of a local tourism community project (Waligo et al., 2013) and therefore be more action/ knowledge exchange focused. Regardless of this implicit learning focus, as relationships develop amongst members in the set as they work together in the practice of tourism development, learning is simplified as opposed to facilitated in an evolving LC context (Marsden et al., 2010, Lave and Wenger, 1991).

As communication increases among micro firms and stakeholders in the wider evolving LC the knowledge base is enhanced (Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012); thus overcoming the micro firm's traditionally inward sourcing of knowledge and advice (Down, 1999; Komppula, 2014) in a learning and knowledge exchange context. In addition, any knowledge that is co-produced needs to be shared with the wider community (Valkering et al., 2013) to be of value or else it may not be captured and leveraged, and therefore it will remain lost to the wider community (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). Hence, the importance of a two way flowing communication process supported by informal face-to-face communications such as annual general meetings (AGMs) and the distribution of detailed meeting minutes (McAreevey and McDonagh, 2011; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). In addition, considering that participation is voluntary, Marsden et al. (2010) note time is critical for community sustainability initiatives as volunteers often use their own personal time to understand skills. As such, in terms of effective communication in an evolving LC setting, Reinl and Kelliher (2014) suggest that the broker must ensure that meeting times are rotated to engage members and that the meeting agenda directly involves all participants to avoid disengagement.

For the local rural tourism broker to be effective in encouraging collaborative practice, these individuals should engage active or less active members, even if their views differ politically to that of other members (Marshall and Rollins, 2004). Thus, the broker values and supports all members as they have the ability to recognise the need for new ideas and experiences (Marsden et al., 2010). In this pursuit the broker connects micro firm O/Ms to external LC expertise for knowledge and business enhancement (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). Wenger (1998; 2000) labels this role as that of a ‘boundary spanner’ and notes that it involves managing the periphery of the LC. By acting in a boundary spanning capacity the LC broker enhances the knowledge base by building bridges between LCs and as a result information can be exchanged smoothly with less central members (Oliveira and Gama, 2013; Timur and Getz, 2008) inside and outside the LC. In this context, the significance of both internal and external LC members having a common understanding with one another is necessary for knowledge to be leveraged across boundaries according to Valkering et al. (2013). This can be problematic in a LC environment due to the embedded nature of micro firm learning and knowledge, the inward focus of micro firm O/Ms (Down, 1999) and the dynamic stakeholder interests of this cohort (Valkering et al., 2013). Hence the broker can be instrumental in ensuring shared meaning is established between core and wider LC members (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

As referred to above, for the community to be sustainable in the longer term, a rotating broker structure is necessary to avoid broker/ leadership burn-out (Ahlström-Söderling, 2003; Marsden et al., 2010; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). Furthermore, Levin (1993) and Reinl and Kelliher (2014) argue that the network broker should only participate for as long as necessary because individual O/Ms need to take responsibility for community development and resultant outcomes. According to Reinl and Kelliher (2014) if the broker role is dominant in the evolving LC both the process of building shared meaning and community level learning will be hindered (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

4.6 Evolving learning community

It is evident from the discussion above that facilitated LC environments employ more structured learning processes/ strategies, and the literature demonstrates that strategies adopted in these settings may support the successful and subsequent evolution of an independent LC (Halme, 2001; Morrison et al., 2004; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014) after facilitation ends. Thus, the value of facilitated support in overcoming micro firm learning barriers (see section 4.1) becomes apparent as do the challenges of sustaining a LC in an independent context. As noted in section 4.1.1.2 above, evolving LC members can draw on learning resources from the facilitated setting (Kelliher et al., 2009; Tell, 2000), resources which include, but are not limited to, access to a multi-level knowledge base via benchmarking activities, interactive websites, newsletters and learning materials (Kelliher et al., 2009; Tell, 2000). The latter resources act as seeding structures in an evolving LC context.

4.6.1 Seeding structures

Kelliher and Reinl's (2011) research study indicates that independent LC participants showed a strong preference to draw on learning resources from the facilitated setting and that these resources support the development of a common language (Hara and Schwen, 2006; Jørgensen and Keller, 2008), shared meaning and a sense of community (Lave and Wenger, 1991) among members. These resources function as seeding structures (Thompson, 2005) which equate to facilitated resources that are utilised to support learning in an independent community (Lave and Wenger, 1991), where it is important members can negotiate these resources on their own terms (Hara and Schwen, 2006; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Waligo et al., 2013). As information, ideas and experiences in relation to these resources are shared and developed (Wenger et al., 2002) amongst members in an evolving LC, they are reinterpreted and reshaped in practice which signifies learner autonomy (Lave and Wenger, 1991) (see section 3.3.1). While these resources may instil a sense of community amongst LC members (Kelliher et al., 2009; Tell, 2000) and act as learning enablers, Florén and Tell (2004) suggest that the absence of involvement in the co-creation and development of such resources can signify a closed LC. As a consequence,

the ability of a LC to self-sustain can be hindered if members fail to recognise the value of new perspectives resulting in knowledge becoming stale or redundant (Halme, 2001).

4.6.1.1 Competence development as a seeding structure

Boland and Tenkasi (1995) highlight the importance of breaking away from previous rules and creating new ones, which they label as ‘interpretive competence’. For this to happen, a certain amount of unlearning is required, which as previously stated can be difficult for rural micro firm O/Ms. In this context an open and democratic structure that permits negotiation and fresh ideas is crucial to the development of learning and knowledge exchange (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Morrison et al., 2004) and is necessary for sustained participation and learning. As short-term goals can be prioritised over long term goals (Noel and Latham, 2006) in the micro firm environment, evolving LC members must have a vision and a goal (Ahlström-Söderling, 2003; Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Kekale and Vitalia, 2003) and be committed to the practice of the LC. The LC goals need to be constantly reviewed and future learning requirements discussed in order for it to be operable and sustainable (Kekale and Vitalia, 2003) as LCs are a collection of relationships and therefore they are fluid and change over time (Marsden et al., 2010; Pavlovich, 2003). As learning evolves the structure and practice of a community will transform (Wenger, 1998).

Reinl and Kelliher (2014) note that as an evolving LC will have no formal structure and participation will be voluntary, members will face a significant challenge in managing and sustaining their own learning structures (as supported by Iles and Yolles, 2004). Additionally, participation and learning will be influenced by shared histories of learning (Wenger, 1998) and the diverse lifestyle motivations and expectations of members connected in relationships which are voluntary and mutually dependent (Getz and Carlsen, 2005; Marchant and Mottiar, 2010; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Mottiar, 2007; Reijonen and Komppula, 2007). Various other factors will influence participation in an evolving LC and in turn, shape LC practice. Sustainability may be enhanced in an evolving LC setting if

individuals have previously learned together in practice (Florén and Tell, 2004; Wenger, 1998). Thus, shared histories of learning are considered next.

4.6.2 Shared histories of learning

When tourism operators have learned in practice together previously, trust will have been stabilised (Oliveira and Gama, 2013; Wenger, 1998) and social relationships strengthened (Jämsä et al., 2011; Lave and Wenger, 1991) to a certain degree. Ideally, open communication and an ethos of respect and trust are promoted through the LC (Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012) because it is important that any knowledge that is co-produced in the learning process is communicated to the wider community (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Valkering et al., 2013) to be of value (as noted in section 4.5). From a CoP angle, Campbell et al. (2009) contend that the personal history of a learner, which is formed from social relationships, will determine their level of engagement with the practice of the community. Hence, depth of involvement is determined from established learning relationships (Thompson, 2005; Wenger et al., 2002). Thus, if the evolving LC member has a history of learning with other members in the community then it is more likely that they will participate in practice, and display a deep depth of involvement (Wenger, 1998).

Wenger (1998), Florén and Tell (2004) and Kelliher and Reinl (2011) believe that a shared history can enhance the learning process as the boundary between stakeholders and individual micro firms is redefined leading to continuous learning and change (Friedman and Desivilya, 2010), thus internal and external LC engagement should be balanced. However, as previously noted, Florén and Tell (2004) believe that a shared history can negatively impact upon learning and the resultant negotiation process, hindering the ability of members to develop new perspectives leading to a closed LC. In terms of balancing internal and external engagement, a strong broker has been shown to counteract the knowledge boundary deficits of micro businesses referred to earlier (see section 4.5 above).

4.6.3 Forms of participation

Rural tourism micro firms may have a strong emotional attachment to a particular area and as such they often try to influence the future of that community (Brouder and Eriksson, 2013; Thomas and Thomas, 2006). Diverse lifestyle motivations can influence participation and identity (Dewhurst et al., 2007; McAreavey and McDonagh, 2011) and impact on the sustainability of the group over time if shared meaning cannot be established (Brouder and Eriksson, 2013). Stakeholders have diverse interests in a tourism development context (Timur and Getz, 2008) and tensions can arise between those who have a development approach and those who have an ecological approach that seeks to sustain tourism without growth (Caffyn, 2000; Jaouen and Lasch, 2015; McAreavey and McDonagh, 2011) so the landscape remains natural and/ or that their own peaceful lifestyle may be maintained. The various identities and forms of participation in an evolving LC (Marsden et al., 2010) highlight the importance of space in a LC as a democratic negotiation process (Lave and Wenger, 1991) where tourism operators can share different perspectives and find common ground (Valkering et al., 2013; Wenger, 1998) to sustain future collaborative learning and practice to drive the community forward.

Due to the resource constraints faced by micro firms (see section 2.3.4) some members may only volunteer to work on certain tasks/ projects. The selection of tasks to engage with may also be influenced by personal preference (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Waligo et al., 2013) or political pressure (Wenger, 1998). Hence, some LC members may choose to take a less active, albeit valuable role (Florén, 2003), in the community. As a result of this, learning membership and identity can begin to evolve at a sub group level reflecting the idea that identity is framed by the type of involvement an individual has in a community and vice versa (Wenger, 1998). This can be problematic for the wider LC where sub group activities are not incorporated into a community wide learning strategy and agenda as it requires a certain level of learning competence (Man, 2007). Furthermore, community level learning can be hindered as less active members fail to understand requests for their contribution to the wider community as they do not frequently participate in practice and dialogue (Wenger, 1998).

Ultimately, as a member's identity and membership develops they move from shallow depth of involvement to a deep depth of involvement in the evolving LC (Lave and Wenger, 1991). As noted in chapter three (see section 3.2.1.1), this reflects learning in itself as the member moves from being on the periphery to more active participation (Jørgensen and Keller, 2008; Lave and Wenger, 1991). This movement can potentially lead to a contemplation of power dynamics as core members are invested in practice (Valkering et al., 2013) and therefore may block a newcomer's development into a full participant in the CoP (Handley et al., 2006; Wenger, 1998). Thus, power dynamics in an evolving LC is considered next.

4.6.4 Power dynamics

In the absence of guiding structures (Handley et al., 2006) a certain degree of legitimacy is required for LC involvement (Timur and Getz, 2008; Waligo et al., 2013). A sense of security evolves as micro firm O/Ms open up about their problems (Florén and Tell, 2004) and begin to discuss and ultimately negotiate their issues and opportunities with one another. Negotiation, a fundamental component of learning may be difficult due to issues surrounding power and voice, as more active LC members will have greater control over the direction of practice than less active members (Handley et al., 2006; Marshall and Rollins, 2004; Timur and Getz, 2008; Wenger, 1998). Furthermore, von Friedrichs Grängsjö, (2003) points out that the relationship between individuals in a rural community can be weakened by position and power and therefore power relationships in a community need to be managed by encouraging cooperative relationships which will facilitate the establishment of common interests (Nielsen and Thomsen, 2011). Power dynamics can also influence collaboration within and across LC boundaries (Wenger, 2000). These boundary interactions are explored next.

4.7 Boundary interactions

While local micro firm experience is important and the availability of local networks is vital (Brouder and Eriksson, 2013), this does not contradict the importance of acquiring non-local knowledge and skills (Bathelt et al., 2004). As this research focuses on the elements and relationships that influence learning in evolving LCs in the micro firm rural tourism context in Canada and Wales, broadly speaking, that will include boundary interactions between the LC and its external environment. For example, those with expert knowledge outside the boundaries of the core LC may be called upon by members to address internal competence shortfalls (Kelliher and Reinl, 2011) and/ or to overcome difficulties they face from their external environ (see chapter two for external challenges, section 2.4). External impulses necessary for internal development (Lundberg and Tell, 1998) and firm competitiveness (Kelliher and Reinl, 2009) will also influence collaborative practice within the LC. For example, when practice is prompted from external relationships '*resource impact and information flow into and out of an ELC*' is generated, and this interaction can facilitate further learning events (Halme, 2001; Reinl, 2011: 208).

In considering the above, there is clear value from interacting with external agents, where resources and new competencies can be gained from such activities. Valkering et al. (2013) emphasise this by pointing out that new ideas, knowledge and varying experiences and perspectives can all add to a rich learning process and assist with sustaining an independent LC in the longer term. These values can be amplified in a rural tourism context, as cooperative stakeholder relationships are seen as key to improving competence and learning as rural micro firm O/M skills and knowledge are acquired through their social interactions with other LC stakeholders (Kelliher et al., 2009; Man, 2006), where O/Ms can also gain an in-depth understanding of the dynamic learning processes (Sol et al., 2013) as they engage with them in everyday activities. However, given the heterogeneity of LC micro firm stakeholders (Jaouen and Lasch, 2015), sufficient common ground will need to be established among the LC broker and other stakeholders for knowledge boundaries to be crossed, which can be a challenging aspect in an independent

setting as learning interests vary amongst stakeholders (Valkering et al., 2013) and knowledge is embedded in practice (Carlile, 2002).

The LCs periphery is not just an important learning site but is also an innovative site (Lave and Wenger, 1991) where rich ideas for tourism/ rural development can be generated. While a degree of autonomy needs to be preserved in individual LCs, strengthened external connections can result in the boundary of the evolving LC becoming blurred (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Timur and Getz, 2008). Hence stakeholders outside the core LC will likely require assistance in understanding the LCs learning and knowledge dynamics. In addition, key activities such as boundary spanning are extremely important to small firms as the broker is usually connected with other communities of knowledge, and so they assist with moving knowledge between communities (Shaw and Williams, 2009). In this context ‘artefacts’ are important tools of understanding as they encompass what has been learnt in the past (Halme, 2001) and facilitate ‘*the translation of actions and understanding between communities*’ (Jones et al., 2010: 659; Lave and Wenger, 1991). These learning resources (artefacts) including documents, stories and rules emerge through sustained practice and are subsequently used to negotiate meaning (Wenger, 1998). Differences in interpretation of these communal resources offer an opportunity for LC members to negotiate meaning (Halme, 2001; Morrison et al., 2004) permitting LC relationships to develop and the LC to evolve (Wenger, 1998) as a result.

As boundaries form with the external environment, there are certain criteria (financial/ psychological) that can determine inclusion/ exclusion through membership in an evolving LC. Morrison et al. (2004) recognised that the engagement of members was motivated by payment of membership fees. However, they highlight that membership contributions can also limit the success of a community, a view supported by Bathelt et al. (2004) and Brouder and Eriksson (2013), among others. Membership should be fluid to reflect the needs of community members (Fuller-Love and Thomas, 2004; Oliveira and Gama, 2013). Additionally, Down (1999: 275) notes that participation in a community cannot be guaranteed by membership and that ‘*participation should not be excluded by lack of membership*’.

It is clear from the above discussion that the LCs boundary will continuously be redefined as rural micro firms, brokers and other tourism/ rural development stakeholders enter and exit the LC (Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Oliveira and Gama, 2013). In this process newcomers (i.e. O/Ms of micro firms) bring new experiences and perspectives and stimulate reflection among established members (Oliveira and Gama, 2013; Wenger, 1998). As the knowledge and expertise of established members combines with that of newcomers, innovative ideas are stimulated and as collaboration increases among ‘old-timers’ and ‘newcomers’ conflict and challenges arise which offer up opportunities for learning evolution (Friedman and Desivilya, 2010; Lave and Wenger, 1991). Table 4.2 summarises the literary themes discussed above relating to the evolution of a rural micro firm LC.

4.8 Rural micro firm evolving learning communities: emergent themes

Based on the preceding discussion, table 4.2 summarises the emergent themes relating to rural micro firm evolving LCs.

Table 4.2 Evolving Rural Micro Firm Learning Community: Emergent Themes

Key evolving LC themes	Description	Supporting literature
Catalyst for collaboration	Shared history of learning - established LC value realised.	Florén and Tell, 2004; Thompson, 2005; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002.
Relationships	<p>Informal and fluid;</p> <p>Voluntary and mutually dependent;</p> <p>Stabilised to varying degrees from established learning histories;</p> <p>Indistinct roles require legitimacy.</p>	<p>Lave and Wenger, 1991; Marsden et al., 2010; Pavlovich, 2003; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014.</p> <p>Getz and Carlsen, 2005; Marchant and Mottiar, 2010; Mottiar, 2007; Reijonen and Komppula, 2007.</p> <p>Florén and Tell, 2004; Kelliher et al., 2009; Morrison et al., 2004; Oliveira and Gama, 2013; Wenger, 1998.</p> <p>Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Lave and Wenger, 1991.</p>
Strategies	<p>Formal broker to LC broker transition (support) - balance broker step back to promote autonomy;</p> <p>Democratic negotiation drives LC forward;</p> <p>Boundary interactions enrich learning and knowledge exchange leading to LC barrier release;</p> <p>Informal communication strategy nurtures shared meaning.</p>	<p>Morrison, 2013; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Waligo et al., 2013.</p> <p>Hara and Schwen, 2006; Jørgensen and Keller, 2008; Marsden et al., 2010; Waligo et al., 2013.</p> <p>Kelliher and Reinl, 2011; Kelliher et al., 2009; Man, 2006; Valkering et al., 2013.</p> <p>McAreevey and McDonagh, 2011; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014.</p>
Resources	<p>Can draw on resources used in the facilitated environment;</p> <p>Shared repertoire of communal resources - artefacts store past learning and facilitate understanding among LC members.</p>	<p>Kelliher et al., 2009; Tell, 2000.</p> <p>Halme, 2001; Hara and Schwen, 2006; Jørgensen and Keller, 2008; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998.</p>
Learning development	<p>Develops through engagement in practice;</p> <p>Enhanced if evolving LC</p>	<p>Lave and Wenger, 1991; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014.</p> <p>Ahlström-Söderling, 2003; Bessant and</p>

	<p>members have a vision, goals and commitment to practice;</p> <p>Negotiation of communal resources among LC members offers an opportunity for learning development;</p> <p>Influenced by: Broker contributions; lifestyle motivations; community politics; power; learning history.</p>	<p>Tsekouras, 2001; Kekale and Vitalia, 2003.</p> <p>Halme, 2001; Morrison et al., 2004; Wenger, 1998.</p> <p>Florén and Tell, 2004; Lave and Wenger, 1991; McAreavey and McDonagh, 2011; Mottiar, 2007; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Timur and Getz, 2008; Wenger, 1998; 2006.</p>
Sustainability	<p>Broker replenishment to avoid leadership burn out;</p> <p>Value of boundary interactions/ newcomers to LC regeneration;</p> <p>Learner autonomy evident in the co-creation and use of resources and artefacts with the wider LC.</p>	<p>Ahlström-Söderling, 2003; Marsden et al., 2010; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014.</p> <p>Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011; Oliveira and Gama, 2013; Valkering et al., 2013.</p> <p>Jones et al., 2010; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998.</p>

4.9 Conceptual learning community model

The criteria identified in tables 4.1 and 4.2 above informed the conceptual evolving LC model presented in figure 4.1 below. The model demonstrates that the LC is influenced by a number of internal and external criteria; these include resource constraints, the external environment, effective communication channels and the impact of power dynamics, histories of learning and varying forms of participation in the LC. The interplay between broker support and broker step back is core to promote autonomy in the LC. Boundary interactions (between the core and wider LC) promote LC evolution and sustainability and the crucial role of communication among LC members and resultant negotiation of conflicts and issues. These factors consequently contribute to sustainable relationships between individual learners within the evolving LC.

In the pursuit of meeting research objective number 4, the conceptual model will guide the selection of cases in the first instance, and multi-country findings will then assist in the models development through a multi-case interpretivist approach in the Canadian and Welsh rural tourism context. To the best of the researcher's knowledge this is the only multi-country study of its kind that has mapped the evolutionary dynamics of learning in an evolving LC environment.

Figure 4.1: Evolving Learning Community Model

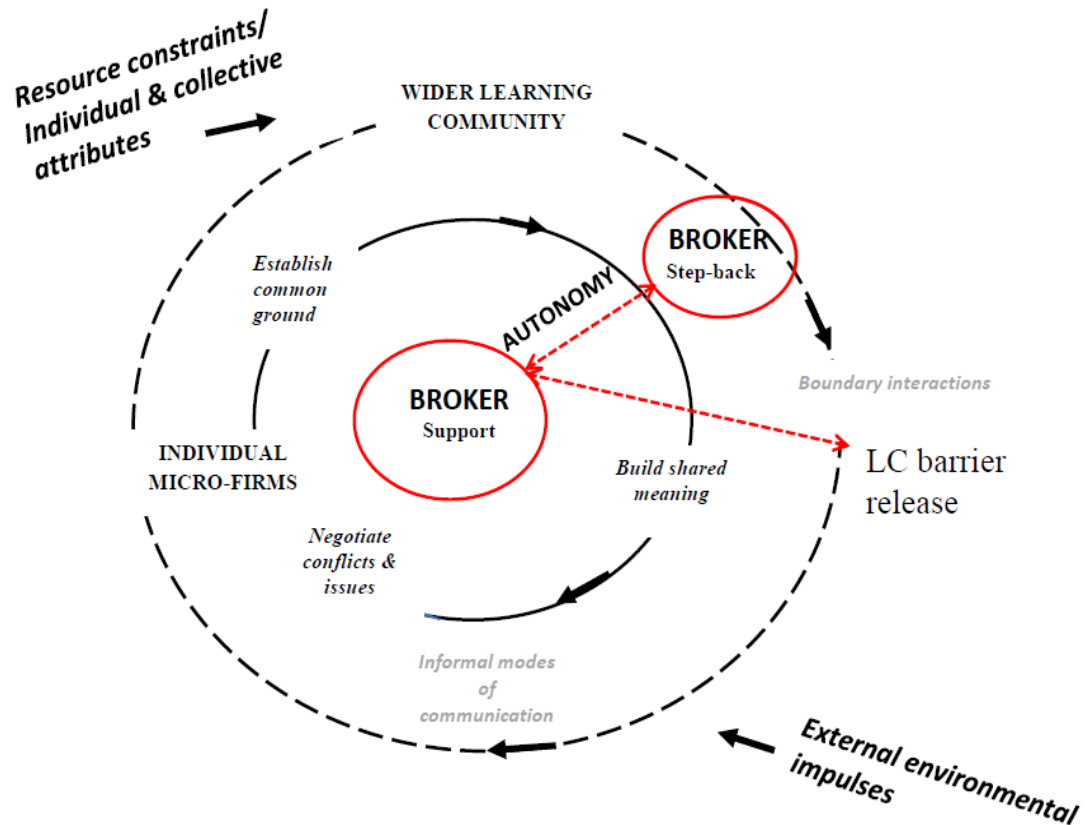


Figure 4.1 represents the interplay evident in and between the evolving LC criteria (see tables 4.1 and 4.2). Individual micro firms participate in the LC and in doing so over time; the O/Ms establish common ground, build shared meaning and negotiate conflicts and issues as they arise. These activities occur in a cyclical manner as the LC matures (inner cycle, figure 4.1). The wider LC (beyond the micro firm participants) uses informal modes of communication to ‘flex’ the inner LC activities, while also providing a bridge to the external environment through various boundary interactions. These layered activities allow access to external environmental impulses through the resultant LC barrier release, thereby compensating for internal resource constraints and gaining from the individual and collective attributes affiliated to the LC. There is an underlying assumption that evolution is progressive rather than an entity with an end-point, therefore the represented interactions and activities are cyclical in nature.

The broker support role is at the centre of the LC in recognition that a structure and effective leadership is necessary for an evolving LC to operate efficiently. Given the challenges to effective collaboration/ learning outlined above, the model shows that support acts as a tool in easing such barriers. The rural tourism stakeholders (core and wider LC members) and the evolving LC itself begin to self-sustain as continued buy-in is secured from LC members. However, the pivotal support function depicted in figure 4.1 must be balanced with a broker 'step back' phase which involves the transition of the leadership role to the local rural tourism broker (Gibb, 1997; Waligo et al., 2013) in order for LC members to achieve learner autonomy and thus for the evolving LC to be sustained in the longer term.

The boundary component of the model recognises that different LCs are linked together but also that their autonomy must be preserved while external connections are strengthened to accommodate the transfer of innovative energy between them (as noted by Lave and Wenger, 1991). This is acknowledged in the link between support and boundary interactions and also in the boundary spanner function, as the broker nurtures learning relationships between core and external LC members (Kelliher and Reinl, 2011). The LC model also acknowledges that common features are necessary for knowledge to be leveraged across boundaries and to sustain a healthy learning dynamic (Valkering et al., 2013). Negotiation becomes particularly important in pursuing shared meaning (Lave and Wenger, 1991; McAreavey and McDonagh, 2011; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014) in a LC as members will have diverse interests and perspectives and indistinct roles. Here, communication strategies are required to facilitate problem solving and knowledge sharing which permit sustainable learning in practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Marsden et al., 2010; Waligo et al., 2013).

4.10 Conclusion

The chapter highlighted that a number of micro firm LCs exist in the micro firm and learning networks literature. The environments relevant to this study include the micro firm LC, facilitated LC, independent LC and evolving LC. In a micro firm LC when collaborative strategies such as the learning set and the role of the broker are utilised by members it can lead to learner autonomy, resource sharing and relationship development. These latter attributes formed the micro firm LC definition adopted in this study. It was also noted that a micro firm LC can be organic and emerge from within the local tourism community itself, or under a facilitated catalyst.

In the facilitated LC it was argued that the collaborative strategies adopted in this environment will differ to those employed in an independent context and will be determined by the broker who facilitates the LC. For example, it was noted that if the facilitated LC is brokered by academia then the learning set will have an underlying learning component, whereas if it's brokered by a tourism support organisation (for example an local tourism organisation) the focus may be action orientated with little intentional learning occurring which raises questions with regard to the sustainability of an independent micro firm LC. However, it was established that regardless of who brokers a facilitated micro firm LC (academe/ tourism support circles) the core ethos of the broker is to develop social relationships and shared meaning amongst members as they learn together in the practice of tourism development and in doing so it is more likely that an autonomous LC will be sustained in the longer term if this is the case. This perspective fits well with Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice perspective that underpins the theoretical base of this research study.

The transition from the facilitated LC to an independent environment can be problematic in a micro firm context and this was discussed from a learning perspective. It was noted that the ability of a LC to self-sustain can be hindered if micro firm O/Ms over rely on training providers for learning support which was referred to as denied or passive learning. In order to counteract denied or passive learning, it was argued that phased autonomy among LC

members was required. Members must also negotiate, reinterpret and reshape resources from the facilitated environment in order for them to become autonomous learners. As the leadership baton was passed to the local rural tourism broker a certain degree of support was necessary to ensure the sustainability of the LC in the longer term. In addition, the need for broker rotation was highlighted at the initial stages of evolving LC formation to avoid broker/ leadership burn-out and to encourage continued participation. Following this, the various factors which influence collaborative practice in an evolving LC were outlined which included broker role, seeding structures, shared histories of learning, forms of participation, power dynamics and boundary interactions. The criteria identified in table 4.2 informed the conceptual evolving LC model which illustrated the unique rural micro firm learning environment. The development of this model informed the selection of cases in this multi-country study and will be considered in the next chapter.

Chapter Five

Research Methodology

5.0 Chapter overview

This chapter examines the philosophical positions and theoretical factors that influenced the research design adopted by the researcher in this study. The research aim and objectives are considered first prior to evaluating the philosophical perspective of this research. Research methods, design and techniques investigated and employed in this thesis are then outlined. A description of the case sites is given followed by a detailed account of data management and the process of how data was analysed. Finally, the trustworthiness of data and research considerations are discussed.

5.1 Research aim and objectives

The research aim must be clear if the research process is to be successful and this will be evident if well-defined conclusions can be drawn from the data collected (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008; Saunders et al., 2009). Research objectives are very specific and will outline the steps the researcher is going to take to answer the research aim (Greener, 2008). The overall aim of this study is *to explore the elements and relationships that influence learning in evolving learning communities in the micro firm rural tourism context*. While previous research has focused on the elements and relationships that influence individual learning in evolving learning communities (LCs), after facilitated support reaches a conclusion; no research to date has explored these elements and relationships in a multi-country study to the best of the researcher's knowledge. On returning to the literature the researcher noted that there was a clear gap in relation to rural tourism micro firm LCs, as little is known about how these elements and relationships influence learner autonomy and the learning dynamic within these communities as members interact in practice, and therefore an understanding of these nuances is sought and stated in the research objectives of this study. The research objectives (RO) are:

1. To study the elements and relationships that influence learning in a micro firm rural tourism community in Canada and Wales;
2. To map the elements and relationships which support or impede learner autonomy within these evolving learning communities;
3. To develop an evolving learning community model for use in rural micro firm tourism communities, based on the multi-country findings;
4. To consider the theory and practice implications of the study.

As the literature review demonstrated a number of micro firm LCs exist in the literature and they all demonstrate varying forms of formality and informality. Micro firms primarily engage in a facilitated LC to gain a sustainable competitive advantage (Kelliher et al., 2009; Morrison et al., 2004; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007) as they aim to progress their learning. The collaborative strategies adopted in the facilitated LC will be determined by who coordinates the LC (academe versus tourism support circles) and these individuals will broker learning and practice to varying degrees (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001;

Valkering et al., 2013). Although learning may be implicit in the facilitated environment, the broker nurtures the development of social bonds amongst members (Jämsä et al., 2011), which will contribute to the sustainability of an independent LC in the longer term (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Learning is influenced by various dynamics in an evolving LC context (as explored in chapter four) and can be problematic due to the broker role, seeding structures, histories of learning, forms of participation and power dynamics.

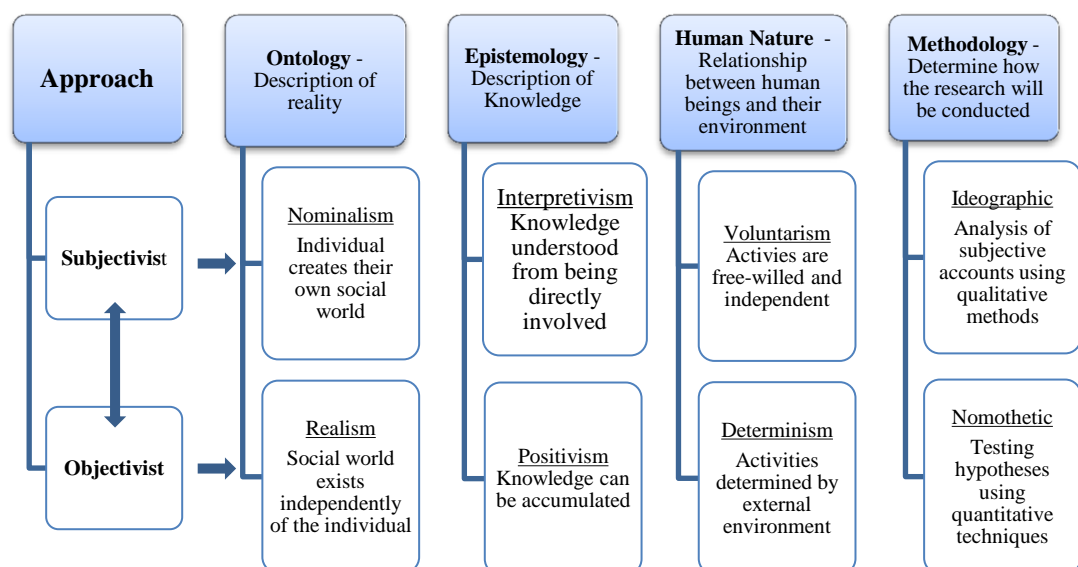
In considering the above, this study departs from the prevailing learning network literature, providing insight into evolutionary LCs. This is the first multi-country study of its kind to the best of the researchers' knowledge. It has been acknowledged that governments of developed countries need to recognise and better understand micro tourism firms (Brouder and Eriksson, 2013), rural communities (Bathelt et al., 2004) and the process of economic development that occurs therein in order to address developmental challenges in these areas (Alonso and Bressan, 2014; Steiner and Atterton, 2015). Thus, while rural stakeholder collaborations are considered pivotal to successful rural development (Brouder and Eriksson, 2013; Pavlovich, 2003), and evidence suggests that stakeholder collaborations improve learning and practice in the rural tourism environment (Halme, 2001; Morrison et al., 2004; Steiner and Atterton, 2015; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007), little research focuses on how micro firms learn independently in a rural tourism context over time (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). There is a paucity of research focusing on how such LCs evolve over time, specifically how the catalyst for LC formation, structure and leadership, forms of participation and identity and boundary criteria support or impede micro firm learner autonomy and influence the evolving LC's learning dynamic. Thus, this multi-country study's research aim is new to the rural tourism micro firm literature. Having outlined the research aim and objectives, the philosophical perspective is considered next.

5.2 Philosophical perspective

A philosophical perspective relates to assumptions by the researcher as to *'how they view the world they live in'* (Saunders et al., 2009: 108). A clearly stated philosophical stance can enhance the researcher's understanding of what they are investigating and assist the pursuit of the research aim and objectives, ultimately leading to stronger conclusions (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). In order to justify this latter perspective, Saunders et al. (2009) believe that a researcher needs to understand the assumptions of the theory that his/her own perspective is based on, and be familiar with other models in the field. In this study, the researcher based their philosophical stance on the social learning perspective as knowledge is understood by individuals as they interpret its meaning as they participate within a communal setting (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

The methodology chosen by the researcher is determined by the assumptions made (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008) in relation to the other philosophical positions (see figure 5.1); ontology, epistemology and human nature (Holden and Lynch, 2004).

Figure 5.1: Research Assumptions



Adapted from Burrell and Morgan (1979)

The subjectivist and objectivist approaches are at opposing ends of the spectrum, denoting that they are situated at two extremes (see figure 5.1). These two dimensions underpin an individual's philosophical orientation. According to Burrell and Morgan (1979: 23), by combining these two dimensions, one can define *'four distinct sociological paradigms which can be utilised for the analysis of a wide range of social theories'*. These paradigms are referred to as; radical humanist, radical structuralist, interpretive and functionalist. This chapter will focus on the interpretive (subjectivist) and functionalist (objectivist) paradigms as being adequate for the scope of this research as discussed later in the chapter, a stance that is justifiable in an organisational research context (Morgan and Smircich, 1980).

5.2.1 Ontology

Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality and the study of human beings and how they view the world as it operates (Hollinshead, 2004; Saunders et al., 2009). From a tourism perspective, Hollinshead (2004: 67) argues that too much attention has been paid to epistemology and methodology and too little to ontology in the tourism research field. As per figure 5.1, a researcher's ontological position spans two distinct viewpoints: nominalism and realism. A nominalist view is concerned with an individual creating their own social world. On the other hand, a realist view is concerned with the social world existing independently of the individual. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) argue that realists believe there is only one reality that we can know and if it is socially constructed then it is not real. As this research stems from social learning theory and takes a community of practice (CoP) perspective (Lave and Wenger, 1991), learning is influenced and interpreted by individuals as they engage in social participation. Given that individuals construct diverse meanings as they participate in a CoP (Lave and Wenger, 1991) thereby creating their own social world, a nominalist ontology is employed in this study.

5.2.2 Human nature

Human nature is concerned with the relationship between human beings and their environment. Ultimately, the researcher has to decide whether they view the human being as controller or controlled (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). As per figure 5.1 this research assumption can be classified under two extremes: voluntarism and determinism. From a determinist perspective, an individual's activities are determined by the external world (Burrell and Morgan, 1979), which underpins a positivist view. The opposing view is voluntarism; here an individual's activities are free-willed and independent.

As noted in chapter four (p. 79), certain facilitated structures and strategies support the evolution of an independent LC. Lave and Wenger (1991) have noted that context will influence learning; however in an evolving LC environment, participation and learning will be shaped by the motivations, expectations and perceptions of individual tourism micro firms, and therefore this reinforces the appropriateness of a voluntarist perspective in this research.

5.2.3 Epistemology

Epistemology is a description of knowledge in that it attempts to understand what knowledge means and how it is produced (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Deliberation of a researcher's epistemological position also helps to determine the methods to be utilised in the research investigation. However, Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) note that multiple answers to these questions exist and hence several epistemological directions are available to the researcher. Therefore, Sandiford and Seymour (2007: 727) argue that in order for research to be valuable the research problem needs to be *'closely linked to the epistemology of the researcher'*. Thus, consideration needs to be given to whether the aim of the research is to gain greater insight into a phenomenon or to construct an objective science. According to Greener (2008), the key difference between these viewpoints relates to whether we can directly investigate knowledge (positivism) or only interpret it from what others say about it (interpretivism).

Positivists believe that the world is external to what is being studied. From a positivist viewpoint, the researcher is independent to the external social world and knowledge is accumulated and added to as the researcher progresses in their study. This assumption implies that an unchanging objective reality exists. Burrell and Morgan (1979) emphasise that this should be measured using objective methods, as value free hypotheses measurements that underline the theory cannot be fully verified. This approach as argued by Easterby-Smith et al. (1994) does not take into account the meaning individuals attach to their reality and the importance of closeness, which is required in tourism studies (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007). Therefore, Hollinshead (2004) and Riley and Love (2000) note that researchers in the tourism field should look beyond the positivist perspective and utilise a more subjective approach to research, and hence incorporate an interpretivist stance to understand the phenomena they are investigating.

Under the interpretive paradigm the world is socially constructed thus the researcher is focused on meanings in order to try and understand what is happening (Easterby-Smith et al., 1991). According to Greener (2008: 17) '*an interpretivist researcher aims to see the world through the eyes of the people being studied, allowing them multiple perspective[s] of reality*'. From a small business networking perspective, Tinsley and Lynch (2007: 20) have noted that the interpretivist researcher attempts to understand the '*meaning...behind the social actions...of the actors*' and how this reflects the environment in which they live. This view is reinforced in studies by Aylward (2012) and Kelliher et al. (2014) in the rural tourism network domain. The interpretivist researcher intends to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being investigated, and in doing so, also acknowledging their own subjectivity as part of that process (Darke et al., 1998). Furthermore, this perspective acknowledges that people will interpret situations in various ways and hence draw different meanings from their experience (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Easterby-Smith et al., 1994).

This research applies Lave and Wenger's (1991) CoP learning theory in order to illuminate an understanding of the learning structures and relationships within evolving LCs and assist with the development of the learning community model (RO- 4). Learning occurs as a result of the interactions between people in a social context as they participate in practice

(Denicolai et al., 2010; Halme, 2001; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). An interpretivist approach is deemed to be optimal because a certain degree of closeness is required in this research to gain a deeper understanding of the attitudes, experiences and opinions (Patton, 1990) of evolving LC members as they learn and interact with others in a social context, and participate in practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

5.2.4 Methodology

According to Remenyi et al. (1998: 28), '*research methodology refers to the procedural model within the research conducted*'. The preferred social stance of the researcher in relation to the philosophical, ontological, human nature and epistemological perspectives discussed above each influence the chosen research method, resulting in a predisposition towards an ideographic (subjective) or nomothetic (objective) approach (see figure 5.1). An ideographic perspective is one where analysis of subjective accounts is carried out using qualitative methods (Burrell and Morgan, 1979) while a nomothetic perspective is associated with objectivity and quantitative analysis, where hypotheses and scientific tests are employed to test data.

This study falls within the ideographic (subjective) tradition, as it '*attempts to understand social reality by interpreting the meanings shared by the social group*' (Brannick et al., 1997: 93). This perspective also facilitates the in-depth analysis required to understand learning in a tourism context (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Reinl, 2011), specifically drawn from a social learning perspective, where learning is socially constructed by individuals (Jupp and Norris, 1993) within the CoP.

In summary, learning is influenced and interpreted by individuals who construct diverse meanings as they participate within a CoP (Lave and Wenger, 1991), therefore a nominalist ontology is adopted. As a result, it can then be assumed that the researcher's view on human nature is voluntaristic as participation is voluntary and individuals act based on free will in their relationships (Down, 1999; Wenger, 1998). An interpretivist

epistemology is employed in this study as the researcher recognises that an individual learns and co-creates knowledge by interacting with others in a social setting (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Finally, an ideographic perspective is applied to understand the social reality under investigation.

5.3 Research method selection

Once a research method is selected the inquiry into the research assumptions allows the progression to the research design and data collection stages. When selecting the research method the researcher should take into account the research objectives and consider insights from the literature review. The methods used to gather data have been termed qualitative and quantitative methods of inquiry and each offer a means of gathering data based on the researcher's underlying philosophical stance.

Quantitative research views social reality as external and objective and such methods are *'appropriate for capturing a view of the social world as a concrete structure'* (Morgan and Smircich, 1980: 498). In contrast, qualitative research is *'an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting'* (Creswell, 1998: 15). After considering both quantitative and qualitative methods from a philosophical perspective, the researcher rejected the quantitative approach in this research as an evolving LC is dynamic and fluid (as noted in chapter four). Therefore, it would be difficult to gain full insight (Blackburn et al., 1991) into the elements and relationships which support or impede learner autonomy in this environment numerically.

Qualitative research can be positivist or interpretive depending upon the underlying philosophical assumptions of the researcher. Given this researcher's philosophical stance, this study is deemed interpretive. Qualitative methods are well suited to studying micro firms (Ekanem, 2007; Gibb, 1997; Jaouen and Lasch, 2015; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011). Furthermore, literature set in the tourism domain encourages researchers to utilise the qualitative method in their research (Gibson et al., 2005; Riley and Love, 2000; Ryan, 2010) as the various interpretive research techniques (for example: semi-structured interviews, observation and a reflective diary) associated with this method will help the researcher to understand how evolving LC participants interpret their social environment and their activities within (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008).

From a social learning perspective, learning is fundamentally a social process (Lave and Wenger, 1991), wherein it is necessary to understand the situation in which learning occurs and as a result a subjectivist approach using qualitative methods is most appropriate in this study.

When researching social phenomena and the dynamics at play in a LC environment, critical issues can be considered and the research process can be enhanced as rich data becomes available by using qualitative methods (Jack et al., 2010; Sandiford and Seymour, 2007; Uzzi, 1997). This benefit is further emphasised in a tourism network context as micro firm O/Ms are embedded in their social context (Kearney et al., 2014; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Siemens, 2015). The subjectivist approach will facilitate an in-depth analysis of submerged variables allowing the researcher to fully understand the elements and relationships that impact micro firm learning (Hill and McGowan, 1999; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Toivainen, 2007). In this instance, consideration of learning sets within the LC enhances the benefit of '*studying a social problem ... in a natural setting*' (Creswell, 1998: 15). In addition, in the rural micro firm milieu, the study of a smaller participant cohort as opposed to conducting a large survey can offer a deeper understanding of the research problems (Chell and Baines, 2000; Jaouen and Lasch, 2015). Thus, when studying rural micro firm learning, a qualitative approach is preferred (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Kelliher and Henderson, 2006; Steiner and Atterton, 2015) as these businesses are embedded in their rural community and thus operate in 'spatial fixity' (Tinsley and Lynch, 2007; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003). Finally, as observation of O/M's social learning interactions (including negotiation and discussion between peers which shapes practice and results in the emergence of a shared repertoire of resources that embody learning) is required for this study (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Brown and Duguid, 1991); a quantitative approach would not reveal (Silverman, 2013).

Ultimately, by conducting qualitative research under the interpretivist mantle, the researcher can provide 'thick descriptions' as they take into account the depth, breadth, context and nuance (differences and reasons) of data (as noted by Miles et al., 2014). Thus, it will enable the researcher to fully explore the complex facets of an evolving LC.

As this study focuses on how individuals learn and interpret meaning as they participate in practice together, and as the epistemological stance of this research is of an interpretive qualitative nature, a number of relevant qualitative approaches are considered. These approaches include action research, ethnography and case study research.

5.3.1 Action research

The origins of action research date back to the 1920's and the Hawthorne experiments. This approach has had a long history in a learning context and therefore the researcher acknowledges that it could be applied in a micro firm learning context (Florén and Tell, 2004; Reinl, 2008). This research strategy is viewed as a developmental process (Florén and Tell, 2004) that involves problem diagnosis, generating knowledge about that problem, taking action and evaluating the results of such actions in the pursuit of social change (Greenwood and Levin, 2007). Action research can be characterised by a number of central features. Firstly, as the researcher and the participants in the study work together it can be viewed as a collaborative strategy (Greenwood and Levin, 2007; Zuber-Skerritt and Perry, 2002). Secondly, this method can contribute to the development of theory and practice (Kelliher et al., 2009; Zuber-Skerritt and Perry, 2002). Finally, Reason and Bradbury (2008) believe it can assist individuals in everyday life as it can produce practical knowledge.

On consideration this approach is inappropriate in the context of this study given that the research aim is exploratory in nature seeking to explore the elements and relationships that influence learning in the organic evolution of the LC and therefore it would be unfitting for the researcher to deliberately influence the learning community environment and its members. However, the researcher acknowledges that interim involvement in and with the evolving LC will be necessary and that this involvement may indirectly influence each learning community's environment and its members.

5.3.2 Ethnography

Ethnography is concerned with how people interpret and explain the way they live and make sense of their lives in society. Thus, it is *‘appropriate if you wish to gain insights about a particular context and interpret it from the perspective[s] of those involved’* (Saunders et al., 2009: 150), and therefore it aims to provide an understanding from inside the community to the researcher. As a result, ethnographic research requires the researcher to be submerged in the subject matter for a considerable period of time, so detailed participant observation can take place (Yin, 2003). This research method is not a common strategy when studying business (Saunders et al., 2009) and for the purpose of this research was not deemed suitable due to the significant amount of time required for immersion in the field and the application of a multi-country approach in this research. However, participant observation, the primary technique of ethnography, is adopted into the research design.

5.3.3 Case study research

A case study is *‘an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident’* (Yin, 1994: 13). The case study is the preferred research strategy when *“‘how” or “why” questions are being posed ... [and] the investigator has little control over events’* (Waligo et al., 2013; Yin, 2003: 1). It is noted in the literature that case studies are most useful when they are utilised in the early stages of theory development (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994), particularly when studying dynamics (Darke et al., 1998) such as relationships. When trying to understand a specific social phenomenon that little is known about (Eisenhardt, 1989; Halinen and Törnroos, 2005), using the case study research method can allow the researcher to gain an indepth understanding of the phenomenon, facilitating rich description (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Polo and Frías, 2010). A key benefit of applying the case study method is that it permits the use of various sources of information to build a picture of the context under study, commonly known as crystallisation, to enhance the credibility of the research methodology (Richardson, 1994). Moreover, considering this study’s overall research aim, this method allowed the researcher to study rural tourism

micro firm O/Ms in the context in which they practice and learn (Bonoma, 1985; Morrison et al., 2010), which is important as this cohort are often embedded in their local community (Kearney et al., 2014; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Siemens, 2015).

Eisenhardt (1989) points out that case study research can be qualitative or quantitative i.e. through the application of questionnaires, interviews, observation and so on. As micro firm O/Ms establish relationships within a LC, quantitative methods will not illuminate the context in which relationships are developed or terminated (Chell and Baines, 2000; Aylward, 2012) which is essential from Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning perspective. Therefore, when studying social phenomena such as micro firm O/M's learning and their interaction with one another, qualitative studies are preferred as there is less chance that rich information will be lost (Jack et al., 2010; Uzzi, 1997). Further, the interpretive case method has been utilised when researching learning in micro firm network and LC contexts (Aylward, 2012; Jack et al., 2010; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014).

Case studies can consist of single or multiple cases with many levels of analysis (Yin, 2009), where the approach chosen will depend on the research aim and objectives (Eisenhardt, 1989). Xiao and Smith (2006) highlight the fact that both single and multiple cases have their drawbacks. Multiple cases require extensive time and resources from the researcher but the analytical benefits outweigh the negatives (Yin, 2003), while single case studies have challenges relating to research legitimacy (Kelliher, 2011). Following consideration of the research aim and objectives (Eisenhardt, 1989), the researcher applied a multi-country multiple case perspective in this study. A multi-case approach permits the researcher to explore evolving LC engagement across two countries (Canada and Wales), facilitating the refinement of the conceptual model (see figure 4.1, p. 98) specifically designed for the rural tourism micro firm environment. When using multiple cases in research, replication logic should allow the researcher to reinforce/ extend theory (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007; Siggelkow, 2007; Yin, 2003), while multi-case analysis between the micro firm and the observed networks in Canada and Wales should help to counteract the potential to leap to conclusions (Kahneman and Tversky, 1973).

Much is assumed about rural micro firm O/M's but little is known about their approach to business as their mind-set is completely different to that of O/Ms of large businesses or those who work for someone else (Jaouen and Lasch, 2015; Schaper et al., 2005; Siemens, 2015). As such, an interpretive multi-case approach is deemed suitable to explore the elements and relationships that influence the phenomena of micro firm learning communities in fine detail (Yin, 2003; Stake, 1995). This holistic approach is useful in this study as it tries to understand the subjective nature of human beings by providing rich data (Jordan and Gibson, 2004) as they participate in an evolving LC. Conceptual themes and patterns can be identified and explored from data (Eisenhardt, 1989; Gibson et al., 2005), which can assist with understanding the dynamic learning relationships between micro firm O/Ms. This approach also allows the researcher to study the context in which micro firm O/Ms practice and learn (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Halinen and Törnroos, 2005; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014).

Yin (1994) believes that case studies can offer a multi-perspective analysis as they take into account not just participant perceptions but also the interactions between participants in the case study. Thus, given that learning is a dynamic process, this interpretive case study approach will offer the most insight (Yin, 2003) into the complex relationships that influence micro firm O/M learning in an evolving LC as it will lead to an exploration of evolving LCs (RO 1-3) in pursuit of reinforcing and extending theory to design and develop an evolving LC model (RO-4). Data will therefore be gathered from evolving LC participants in Canadian and Welsh LC sites, as it is here that learning is created and knowledge resides (Wenger, 1998).

5.4 Case study research design

A case study can be looked at as a '*bounded system*' which locates the case within its physical, social, historical and/ or economic context (Creswell, 1998: 61). As rural micro firms are 'embedded in the social and economic context of the rural community' (Johannisson and Ramírez-Pasillas, 2002; Murdoch, 2000: 415), this can be considered a bounded environment. Yin (2014: 28) notes the importance of developing '*a plan for getting from here to there*', when designing a case study, as any flaw in the design can lead to inaccurate conclusions later. Yin (2014) explains that '*here*' is where the research questions have to be answered and '*there*' is when they are answered and concluded. The process of getting from '*here to there*' involves a number of important steps including data collection and data analysis.

The researcher developed a protocol for data collection (Yin, 2003) to be applied in the participating tourism learning community in each location. A case study protocol is essential in a multiple case design, as it improves the reliability of case study research findings (Yin, 1994; Perry, 1998). Additionally, it assists with data collection as it outlines the procedures and requirements that the researcher needs to follow when collecting data (Perry, 1998). The case study protocol is presented in table 5.1 (and repeated under appendix A for ease of reference). This protocol allows the researcher to establish an identifiable chain of evidence (Remenyi et al., 1998), ensuring '*increased reliability and reduced misperception at each stage of the research process*' (Kelliher, 2011: 124).

Table 5.1: Case Study Protocol

Activity	Description	Timeline
Research aim and objectives	<p>The research objectives are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.To study the elements and relationships that influence learning in a micro firm rural tourism community in Canada and Wales; 2.To map the elements and relationships which support or impede learner autonomy within these evolving learning communities; 3. To develop an evolving learning community model for use in rural micro firm tourism communities, based on the multi-country findings; 4. To consider the theory and practice implications of the study. <p>The overall research aim of this study is: <i>to explore the elements and relationships that influence learning in evolving learning communities in the micro firm rural tourism context.</i></p>	
Case duration	17 months	April 2014 - September 2015
Key informant	Initial interviews with micro firm O/Ms and the Local Tourism Organisation in each case community to discuss the research study and key literature themes.	Canada: June 2014 Wales: October 2014
Case boundary and selection process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The site: An evolving LC consisting of a majority of rural tourism micro firm O/Ms. • The case: Evolution of learning within the evolving LC. • The unit of analysis: Individual learners (members of the LC). • Context: Rural tourism business environment. 	
Case access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full access negotiated with both case participants. • Initial discussion/ interviews with case participants to establish researcher rapport. 	Canada - May 2014 Wales – September 2014 Canada - June 2014 Wales – October 2014
Research techniques	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Semi-structured interviews with micro firm O/Ms (guided by the interview protocol); 2. Observation of learning events and learning community activities in the two case sites at intermittent intervals i.e. Canada and Wales; 3. Informal conversations/ dialogue to reinforce information from interviews/ observation; 4. Follow up informal conversation via skype; 5. Reflective diary (researcher); 6. Documentary sources; 7. Social media – review of online learning community event updates and comments (primarily Wales). 	
Research instrument	The researcher is the primary instrument in the application of research methods.	
Data management	The NVivo software package was used to manage and store data. This software ensured a complete audit trail of data collected was available.	

In attempting to define each case under study the researcher is required to understand '*what belongs to the case ... and what to its context*' (Halinen and Törnroos, 2005: 1295). In doing so, Yin (2003) and Stake (1995) argue that a boundary should be placed on each studied case (for example time) so that the scope of the research study is not too broad. The case boundary and selection process (see table 5.1) therefore involved identifying an appropriate case site in each location (Wales and Canada). In each case, evidence was sought of an evolving LC consisting of a majority of rural tourism micro firm O/Ms. The researcher then had to consider the unit of analysis (UOA) within the case environment.

5.4.1 Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis (UOA) must facilitate large volumes of data to be collected to allow the research aim and objectives to be answered accurately (Darke et al., 1998; Yin, 2003). It can be difficult for both first time and regular researchers to establish what the UOA is (Baxter and Jack, 2008), as it can be identified as numerous things including but not limited to an individual, a group, an event (Yin, 1994) or a case (Baxter and Jack, 2008; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Darke et al., 1998). This study focuses on the elements and relationships that influence micro firm O/M learning as they interact with other members in a LC (Lave and Wenger, 1991), therefore the UOA is deemed to be the individual. It is important to clarify that although the UOA in this case is the micro firm O/M, it is imperative to understand their interactions with other LC members given the collaborative underpinnings of LC engagement (Florén and Tell, 2004; Morrison et al., 2004; Reinl, 2011) in a tourism micro firm context (Toiviainen, 2007; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003).

5.4.2 Case study selection

Halinen and Törnroos (2005) acknowledge that selecting the most suitable cases can be difficult for the researcher as in order to choose the most appropriate case sites the researcher must understand the subject they are investigating (Patton, 1990). The most important thing a researcher must remember when selecting cases is that they choose '*information rich cases*' (Patton, 1990: 181; Marsden et al., 2010) in pursuit of the research

aim and objectives. This will allow the researcher to explore each case in depth, and it will also influence the number of cases that the researcher will select (Eisenhardt, 1989).

In this study, the selection of cases depends on a conceptual model (see chapter four, figure 4.1, p. 98) that has been built from prior theory (Perry, 1998), as the development of an evolving LC model for rural micro firm tourism (RO-4) is driven by this conceptual model. This comparative study seeks to establish multi-country data relating to the established model, in pursuit of RO-4. Therefore, theoretical sampling is most preferred. Theoretical sampling allows qualitative researchers to study individuals or groups, knowing that what is needed to be studied will most likely occur in daily practice among these phenomena and therefore will be visible to the researcher (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994: 202). In the context of this study, theoretical sampling allows the researcher to select the most suitable participants (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007) and the optimum number of cases (Eisenhardt, 1989) in each country.

Having established the foundations and purpose of this case-based multi-country study, the process of case selection is based on which cases offer the most potential to learn (Stake, 2008; Patton, 1990). Having considered a number of alternatives based on the case criterion (see table 5.1) and the restrictions of researcher language barriers as an English speaker, Canada and Wales were chosen as appropriate locations for this multi-country study due to their similarity in rural configuration, each with large clusters of rural tourism micro firms and a significant tourism sector in each country. Seawright and Gerring (2008) argue that when using a comparative case study method as is applied in this research, random sampling is not required as it is likely that the small number of selected cases will not be representative of the whole population. As a consequence, the '*random selection of cases is neither necessary, nor even preferable*' (Eisenhardt, 1989: 537). Therefore, case site selection was initially guided by academic faculty from University of Guelph (UoG), Canada and Bangor University (BU), Wales; as each Institute directly liaised with rural tourism micro firms and their networks in their respective country.

Criteria based sampling is utilised (Augustyn and Knowles, 2000) to select LC sites in both countries comprised of tourism related micro firms. Both case sites are situated in rural areas (see glossary for definition) wherein micro firm O/Ms and other tourism/ rural development stakeholders (Marsden et al., 2010; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003) engage collectively in local tourism development (see table 5.2).

Table 5.2 Case Participant Selection Criteria

Country	Criteria
Canada and Wales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tourism related micro firm/ stakeholder • Situated in a rural location • O/M works closely with other tourism operators and stakeholders in the community

The researcher utilised a snowball sampling technique to identify tourism O/Ms to participate in the research study in each locality in the pursuit of *‘information rich respondents’* (Tinsley and Lynch, 2007: 19). In Canada, the perspectives of tourism micro firm O/Ms external to the LC were also considered valuable by the researcher as the group was currently a closed group (discussed further in chapter six) and LC members regularly interacted with these external members on a daily basis. Therefore, in order to gain full insight into the elements and relationships that influence learning in the evolving LC it was important to consider their perspectives in the Canadian case findings. Researcher engagement with both case communities is outlined further in chapter six (p. 149-151).

5.4.3 Case study access

The importance of having established full and complete access to the case site and individual participants cannot be over emphasised before data collection commences (Stake, 2008). Darke et al. (1998) argue that access may only be permitted to individuals and resources if the case study is seen to have a beneficial effect to all parties involved in the study. With regard to micro firms, prior to contact, the researcher contemplated that it

may be difficult to gain access to these organisations as they may be unable to afford the time required for access (Down, 1999). Therefore, it was important to reach a mutual understanding with case participants with regard to the amount of access which was going to be required.

As noted in the previous section, potential LCs were identified in collaboration with senior academic liaisons at BU, Wales and UoG, Canada, and was guided by the case selection criteria (as per table 5.2 above). In Canada, a key informant⁹ in the proposed case community played a significant role in identifying, negotiating and gaining access to other key informants and case participants. Likewise faculty at BU associated with the Green Innovation Futures Technology Project¹⁰ identified two key informants meeting the sampling criteria which the researcher could potentially interview. Access to the respective sites had been negotiated and granted prior to the researcher's initial visit to both countries. In addition, a period of time was allowed so that LC members could ask questions or voice potential concerns in relation to their participation in the research study. As such, the boundaries of the research were formally outlined and agreed (see appendix B: research terms of reference) with participants prior to case commencement in each location.

5.4.3 Case study duration

Given the nature of academic research, it can be assumed that the researcher will be faced with a difficult task when they have to provide a timeline for case study research. It is important that the case study is carried out in a reasonable time frame and that case access to both the site and individuals is available for the duration of the study in order for the aim and objectives of the research to be met (Hakim, 2000). In this study, case duration was seventeen months, as it was at this point that theoretical saturation was reached (Eisenhardt, 1989: 545).

⁹ A key individual that can potentially provide full insight into the area you are studying (Kane and O'Reilly-de Br n, 2001).

¹⁰ This project is funded by the European Regional Development Fund. It is collaboration between the Schools of Business and Science at Waterford Institute of Technology (the researcher's host Institute), University College Dublin, Ireland and Bangor University, Wales. The aim of the project is to support the upskilling of over 300 SMEs to advance the transition to a green economy.

5.5 Applied interpretive research techniques

The philosophical stance of the researcher has already been established (see section 5.2.4) which determined the research techniques employed in this study. From a tourism perspective, the literature acknowledges that data can be collected by the researcher using a number of methods, when employing the case study as a research strategy (Xiao and Smith, 2006; Pavlovich, 2003; Li-Jen and Lockwood, 2006). Additionally, it highlights that both primary and secondary data can be relied upon when using multiple sources. In order to obtain information rich insights (Eisenhardt, 1989), this interpretive multi-case approach uses a number of research techniques. The techniques used in this study to meet and answer the research aim and objectives include: semi-structured interviews including key informant interviews, observation, informal conversations/ dialogue and the researcher maintaining a reflective diary. Further complimentary research techniques utilised in this study included analysing documentary sources (meeting minutes, brochures, business/ project plans and templates), a review of publically available social media site (Facebook (primarily Wales)) relating to the observed LCs (entries by LC members) and the use of skype for follow up interviews.

Employing a variety of research techniques provides numerous benefits. Firstly, Halinen and Törnroos (2005) note that using numerous research techniques can assist the researcher in understanding the phenomena under investigation more clearly. Secondly, it enables the use of various sources of information for the researcher to explore, which is commonly known as crystallisation (as discussed in section 5.7.1). Thirdly, as the researcher's meaning of a story will depend on their '*angle of repose*' (Richardson, 1994: 522), using various research techniques to observe the evolving LC members from different angles will give the case more credibility. Finally, employing a number of research techniques can assist the researcher in understanding how people interpret their social environment and their activities within that environment (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008), in this case the tourism LC; efforts which help to ensure that the researcher gives a '*deepened...understanding of the topic*' (Richardson, 1994: 522).

5.5.1 Semi-structured interviews and informal conversations/ dialogue

The basic function of interviewing in case study research is to offer a valuable source of information (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007). Morrison and Teixeira (2004) further note that the key advantage of conducting semi-structured interviews over other techniques is that in-depth responses are guaranteed. Interviews not only permit the researcher but also the participants in the study an opportunity to express their views and interpretations of events in a favourable environment (Walsham, 1995; Crick, 2011). In order to understand complex phenomena (Easterby-Smith et al., 1991) such as micro firm O/M learning, the interviewing technique is considered appropriate, as *'interviews can provide depth, subtlety, and personal feeling'* (Pettigrew, 1990: 277). This technique provides the researcher with dynamic viewpoints (Richardson, 1994), and it facilitates a platform for creating multiple realities (Stake, 1995) which is consistent with this study's philosophical perspective.

In order to build rapport and trust with key informants, other rural tourism micro firm O/Ms and important stakeholders the majority of interviews were conducted face-to-face, ultimately counteracting issues around confidentiality that the interviewee may have had (Wright, 1996). In addition, it offered the researcher the opportunity to gain a richer understanding of the participants social learning environments by visiting their hometown and place of business, and it contributed to the researcher's understanding of relationships in LCs by allowing the researcher to take into the account the participants' gestures and facial expressions (Greenbank, 2000). The initial interviews had an open structure with minimal interruption from the researcher, as the researcher wanted the interviewees to structure their own accounts (as illustrated by Silverman, 2013: 21) of the local tourism community.

The researcher decided not to record the initial interviews in Canada (Darke et al., 1998) as this activity can inhibit the interviewee and affect the researcher's concentration level (Walsham, 1995). In addition, these interviews were rapport building exercises with the interviewee, and provided the researcher with background data in relation to the case site.

In essence only soft data¹¹ was being collected at this stage. However, following these initial interviews in Canada the researcher found that extensive notes had to be taken during interviews which could be equally distracting and potentially lead to rich details being lost (Walsham, 1995; Siemens, 2010). Therefore the researcher decided to audio record all further interviews that took place with both the Canadian and Welsh case participants, with their permission, as the benefits outweighed the negatives of this approach. Thus, all remaining interviews were recorded and followed a semi-structured format as:

This kind of interview seeks to obtain descriptions of the interviewees' lived world with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena. It comes close to an everyday conversation, but as a professional interview it has a purpose and involves a specific approach and technique; it is semi-structured – it is neither an open everyday conversation nor a closed questionnaire (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: 27).

The researcher utilised this technique to encourage the interviewee to participate in dialogue (Lemmetyinen and Go, 2009). As anticipated by Leonard-Barton (1990) informal conversations/ dialogue with participants can produce rich data and hence greater insights. From a tourism perspective, Pavlovich (2003) and Kearney (2015) agree and note that as the researcher becomes familiar with the case site and participants, informal conversations will be the main source of fine data, and it is in this scenario that participants will be willing to share diverse opinions. Such informal information can assist the researcher with verifying or disconfirming what has been said in interviews, and additionally what has been observed in practice (Pettigrew, 1990).

5.5.2 Key informant semi-structured interviews

The researcher sought to purposively select key informants (Creswell, 2003; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994) who are likely to assist him in understanding the research aim and in meeting the objectives of the study. This technique is applied in the form of semi-structured interviews, where participants are chosen to participate on the basis of specialised knowledge (Adelard Tremblay, 1957; Jankowicz, 2000). Interviews with the

¹¹ The opinions and feelings of case participants in relation to tourism in the LC location.

key informants took place in the two case sites to gain a clearer understanding of how rural micro firm OM's network, interact and engage with the local community (see table 5.3).

Table 5.3 Key Informants

Case	Key informant	Role
Canada	Emma ¹² Hannah	Local tourism organisation representative; Outdoor activities provider.
Wales	Gareth	Bed and breakfast owner.

A key characteristic from conducting interviews with key informants is that the data collected can be information rich (Xiao and Smith, 2006). However, the interpretive researcher should bear in mind the influence the key informant can have on them (Yin, 2014; Mason, 2002). The researcher was also conscious of the implications of forming alliances with key informants and noted these challenges in the researcher's reflective diary (as recommended by Stake, 1995). In order to minimise the risk of bias the researcher ensured that information which was gathered from key informants was verified through a number of other sources of information (Yin, 2014).

5.5.3 Follow-up and clarification semi-structured interviews

The researcher utilised Skype (a software application which facilitates audio-visual communication over the Internet) for follow-up and clarification interviews and for informal discussions with case participants in both LCs. Deakin and Wakefield (2013) note the value of using Skype for researchers with regard to interviewing, as a medium for collecting additional qualitative data from case participants. Thus, the researcher also used Skype to gather updates/ developments on evolving LC activities from case participants between face-to-face interviews. This approach was particularly valuable once initial research relationships were built with case participants given the distance between the researcher (based in Ireland) and the case sites (Wales and Canada) and the resources

¹² All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of research participants.

available for the study (Deakin and Wakefield, 2013). However, given the rural micro firm context of this research, it is important to acknowledge a number of limitations of using Skype as a communication tool in this research including the need for case participants to have access to a high speed internet connection and being somewhat computer literate (Hamilton and Bowers, 2006). Discrepancies in interviews and informal conversations can also be clarified through conducting participant observation (Tinsley and Lynch, 2007) which will be explored next.

5.5.4 Observation

Mason (2002) notes that observation is rooted in ethnographic studies and that it highlights the importance of experiencing naturally occurring data first hand. Snape and Spencer (2003: 7) argue that observation *'attempts to provide a holistic understanding of research participants views and actions in the context of their lives overall'*. While numerous studies focusing on learning have used observation as a research technique (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007; Toiviainen, 2007), its importance in identifying nuances of a CoP is apparent in Lave and Wenger's work (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). In addition, it provides an opportunity for the researcher to verify and validate data that has already been collected, and for it to be refined if necessary. However, before addressing this method, the researcher acknowledges that it can be difficult to give a neutral account and be a complete observer given that the researcher is on-site and therefore will have a feel for the setting and that *'any observation is inevitably going to be selective'* (Mason, 2002: 89).

Participant observation evolved from work conducted in social anthropology (Saunders et al., 2009), where the researcher is immersed in the case site and as a result the researcher is offered a richer view of the events from the inside (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). Participant observation aims to understand the meaning individuals attach to their actions (Saunders et al., 2009) and ultimately it can assist the researcher in discovering what the participants actually do (Pettigrew, 1990). From an interpretive stance, this method is particularly applicable in this multi-country study given the geographical constraints as it

'does not have to rely on 'total immersion in a setting'... and can support a study that utilises other research techniques' (Mason, 2002: 56). In addition, it permits the researcher *'to gain additional insights through experiencing the phenomena for themselves'* (Ritchie, 2003:35).

As evolving LC members participate in practice, their learning will be influenced by others (Lave and Wenger, 1991), reinforcing the need for the researcher to observe LC members in 'real life' as they interact in a social setting (Mason, 2002). In this study the researcher observed tourism micro firm O/Ms in their own place of business and also as they interacted with one another at local community level and in a LC meeting in each case. During each meeting, the researcher as observer sat *'outside the circle and out of eyeshot of the majority of participants'* in an attempt to ensure *'an unobtrusive presence'* (Finch and Lewis, 2003: 196). Interpretations of these observations were recorded in the researcher's reflective diary (Mason, 2002). Documenting these perspectives led to deeper observations over time (Sandiford and Seymour, 2007).

5.5.5 Researcher's reflective diary

Baxter and Jack (2008) note that maintaining a reflective diary in qualitative research can contribute to the data's credibility as it helps the researcher establish ideas and explore the dynamic perspectives of LC members (Sandiford and Seymour, 2007), and as such it assists with making interview questions more focused. Previous research provides guidance that a reflective diary should be kept from the beginning of the study as it not only gives greater insight into the case participants, but it can also be utilised as a tool for mapping the researchers learning development from their initial interaction with the case site and participants (Kelliher and Reinl, 2011) to the end of the research. According to Cunliffe (2004) the maintenance of a diary permits the researcher to critically reflect on their actions and therefore it provides an opportunity for the researcher to learn as they record the development of ideas, choices and their consequences (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Stake, 1995) of LC members. In addition, the diary documents the evolution of the study over time and the researcher's role in the study (Janesick, 2000).

In this research study, the diary was maintained from the start of the study and was updated throughout the research process. It is used as a supplementary research tool to understand interview responses (Tinsley and Lynch, 2007), record LC events and evolving LC member's preconceptions and activities. The diary not only contributed to the reliability of the research but it is also a key source for the purposes of an audit trail in this context. A number of complimentary research techniques were utilised in this study and are outlined next.

5.5.6 Complementary research techniques

In both the Canadian and Welsh LCs, the researcher used various complementary research techniques in the pursuit of providing a more rounded approach to understanding the elements and relationships that influence rural tourism micro firm O/M learning. The key research techniques utilised (i.e. observation, semi-structured interviews, reflective diary) were enhanced through a range of complementary research techniques including documentary analysis, contextual analysis and analysis of case correspondence on social media tools.

5.5.6.1 Documentary analysis

The researcher had access to a number of internal documentary sources in each case community. In Canada, brochures, evolving LC activity templates, business/ project plans and meeting minutes (since its establishment in early 2015) were provided by Emma. In Wales, the researcher had access to past meeting minutes (March 2012 – April 2013) available online through the case community's website and brochures, outlining activities in the evolving LC over time. It was important for the researcher to explore these documents as they enable LC members to communicate with one another and with those external in the broader community. These documents also provide an understanding/ snapshot of the historical background of evolving LC activities to the researcher. This is particularly important as such historic events cannot be observed directly (Hammersley and Aktinson, 1995). In addition, they offer the researcher a good opportunity to

'illuminate deeper meanings' (Ritchie, 2003: 35) and gather empirical data about the case community (as per Jämsä et al., 2011).

5.5.6.2 Tourism community contextual analysis

Social learning research has established the importance of the context in which activities take place (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Influences emerging from the external environment on micro firm learning (see chapter two, section 2.4 p. 29) were explored further in each case community and integrated in the evolving LC model (p. 98) in order to provide a clear picture of micro firm learning in an evolving LC environment. Throughout the doctoral research process the researcher also attended and participated in relevant academic conferences and seminars. These opportunities provided the researcher with valuable feedback from academics and peers on their research and allowed them to keep up to date on new research conducted in the area.

5.5.6.3 Community correspondence on social media

Social media platforms *'open[ed] up new forms of collaboration that are not so bounded by time, place and access to funding'* (Cann et al., 2011: 16). This has resulted in increasing information about individuals, (LC) events and event feedback becoming more readily available online through these social media sites, pursued through the application of complementary data collection tools (Dutton and Blank, 2011). Furthermore, the reliability of using social media technologies in research is noted by Bruns (2008), as the producer of the information is closely linked to the naturally occurring information.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of social exchange within a community framework, a contemporary online communication platform (Facebook¹³) is explored (Wilson et al., 2012) in this study. The researcher regularly checked public Facebook posts made by the local tourism organisation in the Welsh LC as such information can reveal

¹³ Facebook is an online social networking site that facilitates knowledge and information sharing amongst users.

rich concrete data (Wilson et al., 2012) about events that are happening in the evolving LC. In the case of Canada, in the initial stages of this study the researcher checked Facebook posts made by the local tourism organisation to gather background information and find out about events that are happening in the case community, along with any documented feedback from visitors to that event. Research carried out by Cann et al. (2011) for National Centre for Social Research noted a number of limitations of using social media for collecting data in research including validity, representativeness and ethics. In this study, the researcher informed both LCs that he was interacting with each LC's Facebook posts. Further, the British Psychological Society (2007) argue that anonymity and confidentiality can be undermined by using websites such as Facebook in research, as quotations made by case participants on such websites can be potentially traced back to those individuals through an online search engine. While it was assumed that the authors of these online posts knew they reside in the public domain and are therefore an accessible documentary source, the researcher duly noted these limitations and continuously outlined their role as researcher to the LC through the research terms of reference and by provision of regular updates. Given these limitations and as what people say through social media may be filtered giving the reader a one-sided story (Cann et al., 2011) this technique was only used as a complementary data collection source in this study. Any data sourced through this platform was reinforced using other research techniques; observation, semi-structured interviews (face-to-face and Skype) and/ or the researcher's reflective diary.

5.5.7 Measurement of applied learning and learner autonomy technique

To reiterate, this research draws from the social learning perspective and in particular Lave and Wenger's (1991) CoP perspective and as such this will be reflected in the measurement learning technique and epistemological stance adopted by the researcher. From a CoP perspective, an individual's learning and autonomy develops as they interact with others in a communal setting. As a newcomer navigates from the periphery (legitimate peripheral participation) to the centre of the community, their learning develops. As referred to in section 3.3.1 (p. 54), for an individual to become fully autonomous they must not only have the ability to do so but also be capable of taking responsibility for their learning. As participants undertake this journey their learning

development is identifiable through their deepening depth of involvement and ability to undertake higher level learning.

5.5.7.1 Cross-case analysis

Cross-case analysis was supported by the interview protocol (see appendix A) in this research. As recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) the researcher analysed the individual case first before conducting cross-case analysis. Data collected from case site visits was categorised thematically thereby allowing the researcher to explore patterns and differences (Miles et al., 2014) in each case. This approach facilitated cross-case analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994) and assisted the researcher in overcoming the danger of leaping to premature conclusions (Kahneman and Tversky, 1973). Therefore, by organising the data in this way the similarities and differences in each case informed the evolving LC model.

5.6 Research value

In order to meet the research aim and objectives of this study the following steps were undertaken:

- Literature review

An extensive review of the micro firm LC literature resulted in key learning themes (see table 4.2, p. 95) being identified which subsequently informed the conceptual evolving LC model, thus allowing the researcher to *explore the elements and relationships that influence learning in evolving learning communities in the micro firm rural tourism context*.

- Initial case site visits

Key learning themes identified in the micro firm LC literature formed the basis for initial interviews with evolving LC members in both the Canadian and Welsh LC's. In selecting the most suitable case sites in each country, the researcher utilised selection criteria and was guided by faculty at the UoG, Canada and BU, Wales, thus satisfying Research Objective One: *To study the elements and relationships that influence learning in a micro firm rural tourism community in Canada and Wales*.

- Return case site visits

The second visit to each case site allowed the researcher to explore themes and observations from their initial visits and intermediary communication via Skype with case participants to be explored further. This process allowed the researcher to meet Research Objective Two: *To map the elements and relationships which support or impede learner autonomy within these evolving learning communities*.

- Evolving LC model

Key themes identified in the literature that influence learning in evolving LCs in the micro firm rural tourism context informed the initial interview questions on the first case site visits and conceptual evolving LC model (see figure 4.1, p. 98).

The process of establishing learning themes from the literature and developing an evolving LC conceptual model which subsequently guided interviews and observations (see appendix C for observation schedule) contributed to the researcher's attainment of Research Objective Three: *To develop an evolving learning community model for use in rural micro firm tourism communities based on the multi-country findings.*

The refinement of the evolving LC model based on the multi-country findings and literature permitted the researcher to meet Research Objective Four: *To study the theory and practice implications of the study.*

5.7 Data management

Bryman and Bell (2015) refer to data management as the collection, storage and retrieval of data. Analysis of the data was iterative in nature as the researcher moved between the data, codes and concepts to make sense of the data through constant comparisons (Eisenhardt, 1989; Siemens, 2010).

The researcher spent four-five days at the case site on their initial visit to Canada and Wales (allowing for time to travel to/ from the case site). In both cases, interviews were carried out with key informants on the first day of each visit to primarily build rapport but also to gather background information on the case sites. In the following days of the initial visit to both case sites the researcher also interviewed and observed other evolving LC members (rural tourism micro firm O/Ms) in their own place of business. In doing this, the researcher utilised a combination of the observation schedule (appendix C) and reflective diary (as referred to section 5.5.5, p. 128) to record their observations, reactions and opinions and these formed the basis for further exploration by the researcher during the second visit to each case site through observation of an evolving LC meeting (see appendix C for the observation schedule) and further interviews with micro firm O/Ms and other important evolving LC stakeholders. Permission from evolving LC members to record interviews was granted prior to them taking place and transcribed verbatim. The researcher also seized opportunities when they arose in each case site by sitting in on additional meetings and informal conversations. All data that was collected in each case site was stored and managed using a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software package (NVivo).

From an interpretivist perspective, it is important that the data which is stored and managed is trustworthy (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Bergin (2011) refers to numerous advantages and disadvantages of using NVivo in qualitative research. For example, such a software package has been utilised by Stokes (2008), and has been recommended by Silverman (2013) as it can assist the researcher in linking interpretations to reality in qualitative research ensuring that the data's contextual richness is preserved. Additionally,

Baxter and Jack (2008: 554) note that such a package can also assist with organising data in one specific place and as a result raw data is conveniently available for independent inspection (Miles et al., 2014). In this context, the use of NVivo will help others verify the researcher's interpretations of the data which can be difficult in qualitative research according to Sandiford and Seymour (2007). While rigor can be enhanced by using various sources to collect data in research, it can also lead to overwhelming amounts of data (Baxter and Jack, 2008). Therefore in order to ensure that the researcher did not get lost in the data, NVivo was used in this study to sort, reduce and code the data (see appendix D) without losing its contextual richness (Saldana, 2009).

5.7.1 Crystallisation

This research considers the multiple cases by crystallising¹⁴ the data rather than triangulating¹⁵ it. Stake (2008) believes that when using qualitative methods in research no observation or interpretation can be clearly repeated, and what the researcher sees will depend on what angle they are observing from (Richardson, 2000). The researcher is interested in the varying perceptions that evolving LC members hold as these will likely differ because they live in multiple realities (Stake, 2005). Crystallisation of interpretations facilitates greater credibility in this context as LC meaning is formed by a number of individual evolving LC members. As such, it takes into account LC participation. In contrast to this, the '*triangulated approach...draw[s] on the particular and different strengths of various data collection methods*' (Pettigrew, 1990: 277), and upon consideration the crystallisation of data is preferred in this study.

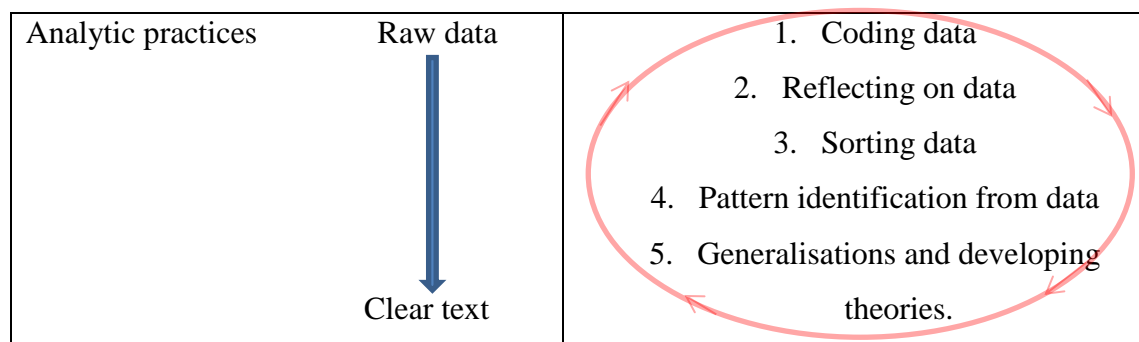
¹⁴ Crystallisation '*deconstructs the traditional idea of validity, accepting that there is no single truth ... and provides a deep, complex and thoroughly partial understanding of the topic*' (Richardson, 1994: 552).

¹⁵ Triangulation refers to data being converged to enhance the quality of the data (Baxter and Jack, 2008) and that '*there is a fixed point or object that can be triangulated*' (Richardson, 2000: 934).

5.8 Data analysis and interpretation

Data analysis should be both a science and an art i.e. both rigorous and creative (see Hennink et al., 2011). Interviews (including face-to-face and Skype-facilitated interviews and conversations), observations, informal conversations, the researcher's reflective diary, social media review (primarily Wales) and the analysis of documentary sources were all used in data collection in this research. This research study utilises an inductive approach to data analysis, as exhibited in figure 5.2.

Figure 5.2: Data Analysis Processes



Adapted from Miles and Huberman, 1994: 9

Applying figure 5.2 to the data analysis process in this study, the researcher began by working through the data, disregarding what was irrelevant and pooling together what was important (as recommended by Eisenhardt, 1989). It was essentially an iterative review of the data, where this process resulted in emerging themes and concepts being formulated (as per Morrison and Teixeira, 2004). This process afforded the researcher the opportunity to explore the phenomena in depth and to allow data to be linked to these themes from the piecing together of important information (Xiao and Smith, 2006). At this stage the researcher focused on each case separately and as data analysis progressed the researcher utilised their reflective diary to verify relationships in the data. A further site visit to the case communities allowed the researcher to explore the emerging themes in fine detail. Relationships could then be drawn from the data as the analysis progressed, reinforced by informal conversations/ dialogue. Following this, cross-case analysis was conducted to

identify patterns and differences in the data (as per section 5.5.7.1) in the pursuit of reinforcing/ extending theory.

Based on the above, the researcher adopted Stake (1995: 71) and Lofland's (1971: 57) description of data analysis. They note that it is the act of deconstructing data, and this can be achieved by assigning codes to the data (as noted by Sandiford and Seymour, 2007) guided by the key themes identified in the literature as is the case in this study (see appendix D for early stage code/ node development). Lofland (1971) reinforces and adds to this description by arguing that taking apart the data should not be the end of data analysis, and should continue until final writing up of the research to ensure all rich and descriptive detail of the case is included. The researcher followed Lofland's advice and coded the data thematically in the pursuit of gaining a deeper understanding of the elements and relationships that influence tourism micro firm O/M learning (as per Tinsley and Lynch, 2007) in each LC. The different stages of process analysis are a guiding framework for refining raw data into clear text, as illustrated in figure 5.2.

The qualitative researcher can be faced with a number of problems with regard to data analysis (Sandiford and Seymour, 2007). The volume of data can be enormous in qualitative research (as noted in section 5.7), and so Eisenhardt (1989) argues that when adding more cases to the research does not enhance the learning of the researcher, theoretical saturation has been reached. The researcher will not learn anything new as the data has been observed before. It is also important that researchers avoid the over-coding or under-coding of data but ultimately this rests on the researcher's judgement. This can have a serious impact on the study's data as the former can lead to the meaning of data being destroyed and the latter can lead to rich information being lost (Miles and Huberman, 1994). NVivo was utilised in this study to store, manage and analyse data. Bergin (2011) suggests that using Nvivo can be challenging and various tools available in NVivo which included importing interview transcripts, creating nodes, coding and other features permit the researcher to undertake a deeper level of analysis. Memoing techniques in NVivo allowed the researcher to reflect and analyse raw data (Saldana, 2009).

Depending on the research philosophy, the research report can be linear-analytic, comparative, chronological or theory-inducing (Yin, 1994). In this research learning is a cyclical and dynamic process (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Florén and Tell, 2004) and so a chronological record over an extended period of time can lead to greater insight into the influences on learning in an evolving LC context. The conceptual themes that were established from the literature review offered a good starting point into understanding learning in an evolving LC. A conceptual model of an evolving LC was developed (see figure 4.1, p. 98), where subsequent data analysis assisted the researcher in overcoming initial conceptions ultimately allowing the model to be refined (Miles et al., 2014) in the pursuit of reinforcing and extending theory.

5.9 Research legitimisation

As noted in the previous sections of this chapter, complementary data collection techniques add to the legitimisation of this research. While interpretive research is noted for its contextual depth (Kelliher, 2011), research results can be criticised in terms of reliability, validity and generalisability which is collectively referred to as research legitimisation. Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to alternative considerations in this context including how trustworthy qualitative data is (table 5.4).

Table 5.4 Criteria for Judging Qualitative Research

Traditional criterion	New criterion	Difference
Objectivity	Confirmability	Audit trail/ rigorous methodological argument/ possible use of computer software.
Internal validity	Credibility	Member checking; noted importance of co creation in enhancing credibility.
External validity	Transferability	Emphasis moves from population to theoretical generalisation. Importance of rich thick description and authenticity facilitating transfer to similar contexts.
Reliability	Dependability	Move from statistical methods to audit trail/ dependable quality of mind of researcher.

Adapted from Lincoln and Guba (1985)

In light of the crystallisation approach adopted in this study, the recommended approach by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as exemplified in table 5.4 is also contemplated throughout the following sections.

5.9.1 Reliability

Research can be labelled reliable if it can be conducted by others following the same data collection procedures and it produces the same results. This is emphasised by Denzin and Lincoln (2008), who note that the reliability of research is strong if the same results can be gained by researchers while using various methodological approaches. However as noted in section 5.7.1, this study crystallises rather than triangulates the data, and so it is difficult

to repeat an observation or interpretation. As noted by Yin (2003: 2014), a major contribution to the reliability of a case study is the establishment of a research protocol as it assists with research being dependable (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), and the use of a case study database, as is the case in this study. Reliability was also enhanced in this research as various research techniques were utilised (as noted by Eisenhardt, 1989) such as observation, interviews and the maintenance of a reflective diary which further enriches the credibility of this research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

5.9.2 Validity

Validity refers to how convincing the research evidence is from the perspective of the reader (Halinen and Törnroos, 2005). Yin (2014) notes validity can be split into three measures; construct validity, internal validity and external validity. Construct validity refers to operational measures which are required for data collection, where the subjective nature of the researcher may confirm data collection (Yin, 2014). Internal validity refers to casual relationships between variables that can be transferred from one setting to another formulating theory in one setting and then being confirmed or disconfirmed in the other setting (Leonard-Barton, 1990). Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to the latter as how transferable the research is in other contexts in evaluating its worth. As recommended by Eisenhardt (1989) multiple sources of evidence were utilised in order to enhance the confirmability and credibility of this research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and to establish a chain of evidence (Yin, 2014). As such, the external observer can map the methodological path that has led to the findings of this study.

External validity often refers to how generalisable a study is (Yin, 2009). As this study employs multiple cases, it will have more external validity than the single case (Leonard-Barton, 1990). However, it should be noted that while cross-case comparisons strengthen external validation, focusing on a single industry (i.e. tourism micro firms) can limit this form of validity in the context of this study.

5.9.3 Generalisability

Generalisability refers to the idea that the researcher can link findings from the case study to published literature (Pettigrew, 1990) which will ultimately enhance its credibility according to Lincoln and Guba (1985). Waligo et al. (2013) note that case study findings can only be generalised analytically and not statistically. However, Yin (2003) notes that in case study work the process of generalisation is into theories and is not from one case to another. Theoretical replication facilitates generalisability of the case study research findings (Yin, 1994). Walsham (1995) extends Yin's (2009: 21) position in his earlier work that '*case studies...are generalizable to theoretical propositions*', to include four types of generalisation from interpretive case study: development of concepts, generation of theory, drawing of specific implications and the contribution of rich insight. Walsham believes that these may explain particular phenomena which has resulted from interpretive research, and may be of value in other settings but are not predictive of future situations (p. 79).

Multiple case designs are preferred in theory generating studies as they permit case comparison (Halinen and Törnroos, 2005) as in this research study. As a result, this study will have greater generalisability over a single case study. As noted previously, theoretical sampling is very similar to purposive sampling, and so as the most appropriate cases were selected it can clearly contribute to the process of generalisability in this study.

5.10 Research considerations

As anticipated by Darke et al. (1998) there are a number of limitations when conducting research, specifically when utilising the case study approach. The researcher acknowledges that a disadvantage in this multi-country study is that the researcher could only observe the case sites at a specific point in time. In addition, Tinsley and Lynch (2007) argue that the perspective of the observer (local versus outsider) will influence their interpretation of experiences as they do not understand fully the participant's situation. In order to combat these limitations the researcher utilised a variety of research techniques (see section 5.5).

Issues around privacy and confidentiality were discussed with case participants in initial meetings and throughout the study. All materials were stored in a locked location and the data was only made available to the researcher and supervisors of the study (as per Pettigrew, 1990). Case sites and participants were kept anonymous for the purposes of this research. Use of social media was carefully managed in light of these considerations.

The link between participation and observation can be problematic in a study of this nature. Walsham (1995) believes that this can have a positive or a negative effect on data collection. Participants may accept the observer as one of their own and grant them access to sensitive information or some may see the observer as having a personal stake in views and so alter their actions (as referred to by Pettigrew, 1990). Consequently, this will affect the observer's interpretations. Therefore, it is important for the researcher to build up a trustful relationship with case participants, and as noted in section 5.5.1 in this chapter, interviews were carried out face-to-face to aid with this rapport building process, supported by interim conversations facilitated by Skype due in part to the distances involved in multi-country case research. In addition, the researcher observed participants 'in situ' for no less than three days in each case community. Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) allude to the fact that case participants may be influenced by the presence of the observer. In order to combat this issue in this study, a variety of sources of information were utilised (referred to as research techniques in this chapter).

5.10.1 Representation

This research study like any other research study is open to bias. The researcher's beliefs and prior assumptions can affect the case study's evidence (Darke et al., 1998). Walsham (1995) notes that biases that arise at the case site may be uncontrollable, as the observer may confirm interpretations with participants in order to enhance the credibility of the research (as recommended by Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Eisenhardt (1989: 536) agrees and argues further that it is impossible to have a clean theoretical slate before commencing research. To clarify, this research adopts Lave and Wenger's (1991) CoP perspective as its theoretical base and therefore the aim is to build on theory. The observer's preconceptions were noted in the reflective diary as advised by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Cunliffe (2004). Here, the researcher noted the influences community members had on the researcher as well as the influence the researcher had on community members. This is important as bias can limit the findings of research (Eisenhardt, 1989).

5.10.2 Ethics

After discussing potential ethical issues pertaining to this research with my supervisors and senior academic liaisons in Canada and Wales, the researcher believed that ethical clearance was not required from any Institute's ethics committee as the focus of this research is on the elements and relationships that influence learning as micro firm O/Ms interact with other stakeholders in a LC environment and not the specific participant per se. At this stage of the research process, the researcher did acknowledge that a sex/ gender dimension could arise as interviewees were going to be selected in a non-random manner, regardless of their gender and that they could be all female, all male or a mix of both. However, no gender specific differences materialised from the data analysis.

Guided by Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) ethical guidelines the researcher ensured prior to the commencement of data collection that all evolving LC participants had given informed consent to participate in this study. The researcher fully outlined confidentiality and anonymity, consequences of their participation and the role of the researcher (see

appendix B: research terms of reference for further details) to all interviewees. The researcher also made participants aware that he was interacting with comments on each LCs Facebook page. Participants were given the opportunity to voice any concerns that they may have had throughout the research process and when any issues arose they were jointly agreed upon.

5.11 Conclusion

This chapter detailed the research framework that was used to guide this study. The chapter began by outlining the research aim and objectives, and detailing the rationale in the context of existing literature. Following this the philosophical stance of the researcher was determined. It was argued that a qualitative interpretive approach was required to meet the research aim and objectives of this study for a number of reasons. These include the importance of closeness to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena being investigated, the value of interpretive research techniques in assisting the researcher in understanding how evolving LCs participants interpret their social environment and experiences within and the ability to create ‘thick descriptions’ to illuminate the dynamic components and relationships within the evolving LC.

After considering a number of qualitative approaches the researcher determined that the preferred research strategy is the case study. A multi-case approach was considered suitable to explore evolving LC engagement across the Canadian and Welsh case sites, facilitating the refinement of the conceptual model (see figure 4.1) specifically designed for the rural tourism micro firm environment. The case design was strengthened by the development of a case study protocol (see appendix A) and its establishment contributes to the credibility of research findings in the following chapter (as noted by Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Theoretical sampling was employed in this study to select the optimum cases. The conceptual model (see figure 4.1, p. 98) will be refined based on the multi-country data from the Canadian and Welsh LCs. LC sites were selected using criteria based sampling and participants were chosen using selection criteria.

The interpretive research techniques adopted in this study that were guided by the philosophical stance of the researcher were outlined in detail. How data was managed in this study was described and this was followed by an examination of data analysis. It was determined that data analysis was iterative in nature and involved sorting and deconstructing the data by assigning codes to it which resulted in emerging themes and concepts being formulated. Cross-case analysis was then conducted to identify patterns and

differences. Finally, the legitimacy and considerations of this research was discussed which highlights that the researcher has taken all necessary action to ensure the research findings and proposed evolving LC model and its refinement are credible.

Chapter Six

Findings

6.0 Chapter Overview

This chapter outlines the findings from the two case communities explored in this study, learning community 1 (LC1) is situated in Canada and LC2 is in Wales. The findings are presented in relation to the elements and relationships that influence learning amongst rural tourism micro firm owner/ managers (O/Ms) in each case community. The established literary themes (see table 4.2, p. 95) and evolving LC conceptual model (see p. 98) guided the emergent themes and allowed the researcher to explore case findings.

The chapter begins with an outline of the researcher engagement with each LC, followed by a profile of each LC location to contextualise the findings. Catalyst for formation and LC structure is outlined and the individuals in each case community are profiled. This is followed by a description of case participant's participation, interrelationships and external relationships. Each case concludes with a summary of the findings. Finally, table 6.9 documents the similarities and differences between each case community.

6.1 Researcher engagement with case communities

For clarity, data collection entailed two visits to both Canada and Wales to build rapport and gather background information on the case sites (visit one), and engage with the LC in each location (visit two). These visits were enhanced by interim Skype-facilitated interviews and conversations, documentary and social media review and the maintenance of a reflective log throughout the study.

6.1.1 Learning Community 1 – Case participants

On the first case site visit to Canada (mid 2014), faculty at the University of Guelph organised contact between the researcher and a key informant (Emma) in the LC. Two initial interviews with other important stakeholders (at that time) in the LC location took four to five days to complete (allowing for time to travel to/ from the case site). However, between the researcher's initial and second visit, one of these stakeholders (Patrick¹⁶) had left the LC location and moved to a different country.

LC membership comprises twelve individuals (see selection criteria table 5.2, p. 121) and includes a variety of micro firm owner/ managers (O/Ms) and various other rural/ tourism development stakeholders (Regional Tourism Organisation 4 members, tourism and economic development consultants, large tourism business O/Ms and government representatives operating at local and regional level). The researcher also conducted interviews with four other micro firm O/Ms who are currently external to the LC as it was anticipated that their perspectives would add rich value to case findings.

¹⁶ All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of research participants.

Table 6.1: Learning Community 1 Case Participants

Participant	Number of interviews (including Skype)	Stakeholder affiliataion	Research role
Michael		Regional Tourism Organisation - Chief Executive Officer	Observed LC member
Owen		Tourism and Economic Development Consultant	Observed LC member
Emma	Six (predominantly interviews with two informal conversations via Skype)	Local Tourism Coordinator	Key informant: Interviewee and observed LC member
Hailey	Two (one informal conversation via Skype)	Micro firm O/M - Restaurant and Bed and Breakfast	Interviewee and observed LC member
Hannah	Two	Micro firm O/M - Outdoor Activity Business	Interviewee and observed LC member
Madison		Tourism and Economic Development Consultant	Observed LC member
Sarah		Regional Tourism Organisation - Tourism Product Manager	Observed LC member
Liam		Township/ council - Chief Administrative Officer	Observed LC member
Ryan		Project Manager - Large Tourism Business	Observed LC member
James	One	Micro firm O/M and Local Business Administrator	Interviewee and observed LC member
Matthew		Township/ Council - Senior Level	Observed LC member
Joseph		Township/ Council - Senior Level	Observed LC member
Olivia	One	Micro firm O/M - External ¹⁷ to LC	Interviewee
Leah	One	Micro firm O/M - External to LC	Interviewee
Rose	One	Micro firm O/M - External to LC	Interviewee
Alice	One	Micro firm O/M - External to LC	Interviewee
Patrick	One	Micro firm O/M - External to LC	Interviewee

¹⁷ Most of the micro firms in the LC municipalities are external to the LC currently (Autumn 2015) but once the proposed strategy for assisting tourism stakeholders to improve community engagement and build the destination is made public (anticipated to be 2018) each of the micro firms in Table 6.1 identified as external will be a peripheral member.

A second Canadian visit in early 2015 permitted the researcher to carry out a further nine interviews with evolving LC participants and important stakeholders (including micro firms external to the LC). In addition, it allowed the researcher to observe a meeting that involved micro firm interaction amongst evolving LC participants and other important stakeholders. The researcher was present on site for six days during the second visit.

6.1.2 Learning Community 2 – Case participants

An initial visit to Wales in late 2014 entailed semi-structured interviews with key informants and individual group members, and also entailed observation in their own place of business. Interviews with two key informants was organised prior to travel in conjunction with faculty at Bangor University. The researcher visit lasted four days. Whilst present in the case site the researcher carried out a further seven interviews with tourism O/Ms in the locality. LC membership comprises nineteen individuals (see selection criteria table 5.2, p. 121) and these are tabulated in 6.2 below.

Table 6.2: Learning Community 2 Case Participants

Participant Name	Number of interviews (including Skype)	Stakeholder affiliation	Research role
Brenda	Two	Large Tourism Business - Manager	Key informant: Interviewee and observed LC member
Dona	One	Micro firm O/M - Bed and breakfast	Interviewee and observed LC member
Aidan	One	Micro firm O/M - Bed and breakfast	Interviewee and observed LC member
Anna		Micro firm O/M - Cafe	Observed LC member
Alan	One	Micro firm O/M - Cafe	Interviewee and observed LC member
Nicole		Micro firm O/M - Jewellery business	Observed LC member
Gavin	Three (including one informal conversation via Skype)	Local Tourist Organisation - Board of Directors	Interviewee
Lynn	One	Micro firm O/M - Bed and breakfast	Interviewee
Jennifer	One	Local Tourist Organisation - Board of Directors	Interviewee
Gareth	Two	Micro firm O/M - Bed and breakfast	Key informant: Interviewee and observed LC member
Una	Two	Micro firm O/M - Cafe	Interviewee and observed LC member
Lauren	One	Micro firm O/M - Bed and breakfast and cafe	Interviewee
Dylan		Micro firm O/M - Hardware store	Observed LC member
Daniel	Two	Micro firm O/M - Cafe and visitor attraction	Interviewee
Darren		Representative for the local bank	Observed LC member
Glenda		Regional councillor	Observed LC member
Seren	One	Micro firm O/M - Small hotel	Interviewee
Other LC members (Two large tourism activity businesses)			

During a second visit the researcher had the opportunity to observe an evolving LC meeting that involved the local tourism micro firm O/Ms and important stakeholders, and to carry out a further ten interviews with evolving LC participants and stakeholders. The second visit to the case site lasted for five days.

6.2 Learning community 1 case profile: The location

Tourism firms in Canada employ approximately 7.7 million people with micro and small firms representing 98.2 per cent of all Canadian businesses (Industry Canada, 2013). The LC is located in southwestern Ontario, Canada and is only a short drive from a number of busy tourist destinations; these include Toronto, Niagara Falls and St. Jacobs. Canada's tourism industry is dynamic, far reaching and comprises numerous sectors such as attractions, restaurants, accommodation and activity providers. The government of Ontario play a research and support role in the tourism industry. In 2009, the government of Ontario undertook a competitiveness study to establish the state of the tourism sector in Ontario and identify how the region can grow its tourism sector. One of the outcomes of this study recommended that a number of tourism regions should be established within the Ontario province, with each region led by one Regional Tourism Organisation (RTO). In total, thirteen RTOs were created in 2011 by the Ontario government after extensive input from industry partners. The LC location is situated within RTO4 which comprises Huron, Perth, Waterloo and Wellington Tourism Region. RTO4 is structured as an independent, not-for-profit and industry led organisation and receives funding from the Ontario government on a yearly basis which equates to over \$1.5 million in 2014/ 15. RTO4 works with industry partners within its municipalities in a variety of areas which include but are not limited to: strategic planning, product development, research and training. Typical activities include working with local developers and directly with attraction businesses on initiatives that have potential to create unique selling propositions.

Nested within that multi-level tourism stakeholder framework, the LC location comprises two municipalities. In 1999, the two municipalities were merged with three surrounding rural areas to collectively form a township¹⁸. The rural areas mainly consist of family operated farms that supply local food and produce to the surrounding municipalities. The township has a total population of approximately 28,000 and the two municipalities relevant to this research study represent 18,000 of that total population. From a tourism

¹⁸ The provincial government believed that amalgamations between local municipalities would lead to cost savings in regard to developing infrastructure such as bridges, roads, water supplies and wastewater. Smaller municipalities merging with larger municipalities would lead to sustainable development in the future and therefore after public consultation the provincial government formed the Township in 1999.

perspective, the municipalities complement each other very well; one is very quaint and the other is more industrial. Historical, personality and identity conflicts among individuals and businesses led to a stark divide between the two municipalities in the past. However, in recent years the animosity between the two municipalities has started to break down, at least at an administration level, as the municipalities' Business Improvement Areas (BIAs) now have a common administrator. In addition, the two municipalities are bundled together for tourism purposes and are served by a vibrant Local Tourism Organisation (LTO). The LTO is part of the community services department in the township. It comprises one full-time tourism coordinator and approximately ten part-time staff to support the tourism department. The LTO does not have a membership base and therefore it is almost 100 per cent funded by the taxpayer.

Tourism activity in the LC location stems from the roots and history of the location and has been evolving since the mid-19th century. The area is steeped in history and prides itself on the protection of heritage buildings and its rural character while offering many high end facilities such as a community sports complex. The location is known for its natural assets which include the spectacular landscape and the natural beauty of the area. The community is also home to many festivals and events throughout the year. The location offers numerous outdoor sports and activities including hiking, biking, zip-lining, tubing, kayaking and fishing, being home to one of the best brown trout fisheries in the country. A river running 280 kilometres flows through the two municipalities and is a central attraction in drawing tourists to the area. The region's only remaining five storey mill situated on the river's banks is the '*jewel in the crown*' as visitors return year after year to witness the river's beauty and majesty. Numerous hiking trails line the river banks as its charm lies in the history along its shores, with trails linking nearby communities beyond the LC location.

The location has a strong heritage identity with roots in manufacturing and agriculture. Ease of access to local and international markets has attracted a diverse community of businesses, artists and professionals to the area. Numerous restaurants, cafes, bistros, pubs and various accommodation options such as bed and breakfasts, modern hotels/ motels and campgrounds operate in the two municipalities. In addition, the municipalities offer unique

boutiques and gift shops with products produced by local craftspeople and artists. The local mill is currently undergoing a significant transformation which is being funded privately by a leading hotel development and management company to the tune of \$40 million. It is expected to reopen in 2016 and will host a special events facility, a second Inn (small hotel), a fine dining restaurant, a spa and mixed retail and residential developments.

The location comprises a young and well educated workforce with almost half of the population aged between 25-44 years. Two generations of business people operate in the LC municipalities; *'the old guard'* who have been operating for many years and tend to have a hobby/ lifestyle business focus and younger business owners who are more driven by economic growth strategies. The location is situated close to three international airports and is surrounded by numerous third level universities and institutions. The vast majority of business owners in the LC municipalities operate and live within close proximity of each other (ranging from 100 metres to five kilometres). The remainder live in neighbouring municipalities and regions.

6.2.1 Evolution of tourism services

Historically, tourism decisions were made by the Chamber of Commerce in the LC location. Emma (who works as the local tourism coordinator in the LC location) explained that this all changed in 1996 when an economic development officer was hired by the township;

[The] Chamber of Commerce doesn't have a tourism role [in the LC location] ... they [Chamber of Commerce] used to ... and the township gave money to the Chamber to run the tourism information centre [LTO]. When the economic development officer was hired in 1996 ... he clawed back the money that used to be given to the Chamber of Commerce and [he] told council that you should be making the decisions as to what you are going to be doing for tourism not the Chamber of Commerce.

In the past the LTO had a steering committee in place but it disintegrated when a key individual left. Currently, the LTO is staff driven and does not have a member base. The impact of this is that decisions concerning tourism are being made by key staff in the LTO without any real input from tourism stakeholders in the LC location. Emma explains that

this lack of engagement with industry partners resulted in the LTO having to reshape their services;

We [LTO] have done a little bit of a re-delivery of services or sort of a re-distribution of what we are doing here in tourism ... we have tried ... to ... get out of the event business, making sure that [our] role is marketing and promotion [and] that we are providing the tools and opportunities for our partners. Trying to do less [of] actually being in the trenches doing the work and just look at how we can nurture and grow a community capacity in tourism.

Previously, tourism was part of the economic development department in the township but now falls under the community services department as previously noted. The rationale behind this shift was stated in the meeting minutes; *'adding tourism to community services shifted it to be more internal, and customer service oriented'*. However, the researcher observed there is still some disagreement at council level about which department tourism should fall under. Emma argues that tourists come from outside the community and therefore she feels tourism and community services are not a good fit; *'I have a difficulty with my department being part of community services. Community services takes care of the community, my audience [tourists] is outside the community'*.

6.2.2 Learning community: Introduction

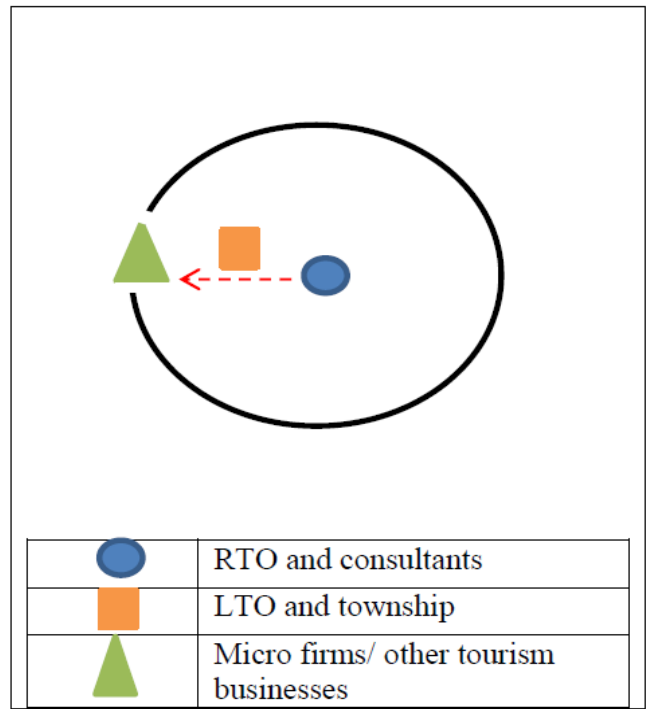
The LC started in early 2015 after RTO4 recognised that *'community collaboration and stakeholder engagement'* needed to be strengthened in the LC location before the local mill reopened, which is currently being redeveloped (see section 6.2). The aim of the LC is to build a community capacity in tourism and develop the location as a destination.

LC members meet approximately once every six weeks. The first meeting concentrated on logistics and once they were agreed upon by all LC members, subsequent meetings/ workshops focused on the development of the tourism strategy (see table 6.1, p. 150 above for membership profile). Membership is based on the following selection criteria; personality/ behavioural traits, personal circumstances of the stakeholder which might determine their available time and commitment (such as the number of businesses they

operate and family commitments) and how long the members have been operating their business and/ or living in the LC location.

As of Autumn 2015 there has been no communication to the micro firms identified in table 6.1 as external to the LC and the wider tourism businesses within the LC municipalities with regard to the practice of the group. This suggests a closed LC structure as illustrated in figure 6.1 below, where core members (Consultants/ RTO) are perceived by other members (micro firms/ other tourism businesses) to have greater influence or authority in the LC. The red arrow in figure 6.1 illustrates that information flows from members at the core to those at the periphery suggesting a didactical approach to communication has been adopted by the consultants/ RTO4 members to other LC stakeholders.

Figure 6.1: Learning Community 1 Structure



6.2.3 Catalyst for learning community formation

Before outlining the process the LC location engaged in prior to being selected as a suitable community to participate in the DestinationNEXT tourism strategy, an overview of the background and evolution of the initiative is provided in exhibit 6.1 for context.

Exhibit 6.1: Detailing the Background and Evolution of DestinationNEXT

The cornerstone of ‘DestinationNEXT’ is to prepare and ensure tourism stakeholders (including but not limited to LTOs, Chamber of Commerce’s and local businesses) embrace tourism from a community perspective. Destination Marketing Association International (DMAI) recognised that the role of tourism stakeholders and in particular tourism leaders in local communities is rapidly changing. Increasingly, tourists are now booking through on-line accommodation websites including Trip Advisor, Air BnB and Booking.com to name just a few. As a consequence, DMAI believed that a tourism strategy was needed to ensure LTOs remained relevant and that they could continue to provide the opportunity for their operators (i.e. local tourism businesses) to be recognised and get their market share. The DestinationNEXT initiative aims to build an actionable and practical strategy for tourism in each location it works with. The initiative is being undertaken by the DMAI and was made possible through a grant from the Destination and Travel Foundation. DMAI established an advisory group comprising numerous senior representatives from LTOs across the globe to guide and lead DestinationNEXT. In addition, DMAI also formed a project team which incorporated tourism and economic development consultants and a number of other experienced executives from the LTO community. The consultants outlined the aim of the initiative;

DMAI is taking a bold leadership step with the DestinationNEXT initiative and its vision for providing practical, clear actions and strategies for sustainable success for its [LTO] members in a rapidly changing future (Strategic road map of DestinationNEXT report, 2014).

As a departure point, the project team established a futurist and industry panel to identify key trends in the tourism industry worldwide and these findings formed the basis for the potential strategies that were included in the survey that was sent out to tourism industry leaders in March 2014. This move signalled the start of phase one of the project. 327 LTOs from 36 countries replied to the survey. Once the results had been analysed by the consultants the following comments were made in the strategic road map report;

To help develop effective strategies, the practical realities of different destinations and [LTO]s must be considered. The analysis clearly demonstrates that one size does not fit all. Strategies and organizational prototypes need to recognise these significant differences. A scenario model was developed based on two driving factors:

- *Strength of destination (e.g. current market position, brand power, air capacity,*

quality of service, and infrastructure)

- *Level of community support and engagement (e.g. political support, regional support, community understanding of tourism impact, and potential membership satisfaction)*

The intersection of these two major, independent factors generates four dramatically different scenarios [as] described below. Each [LTO] can generally find itself in one of these quadrants. [The consultants identified the quadrants as gearing up, destination trailblazers, spinning wheels and risky business] (see appendix E).

The analysis of survey results also highlighted three transformational opportunities that LTOs will need to work towards to address the changing world they operate in which included dealing with the new marketplace (such as keeping up to date with new technology), building and protecting the destination brand (perform a greater leadership role in communities) and evolving their business model (collaborate more closely with local government, non-tourism stakeholders). The establishment of the transformational opportunities and a scenario model from the extensive survey carried out in phase one marked the start of phase two of the project. The model acts as a diagnostic tool kit helping LTOs who use it to assess their current positions in communities by determining the scenario they fall under. The tool kit will allow local tourism community groups to critically evaluate their community and it will facilitate focus with regard to what needs to be done in the future in the pursuit of enhancing tourism development in the community. The goal is to;

Help [LTO]s [in conjunction with their members] around the world become Destination Trailblazers, [and] to help [LTO]s increase community engagement and support as well as build their destinations.

The DMAI will assist local tourism groups in completing the self-assessment and discussing the results by facilitating workshops with them, through utilising the consultants that were part of the project team during the development of the initiative.

(DestinationNEXT: A strategic road map for the next generation of global destination marketing report, 2014)

RTO4 recognised the opportunity to adopt the strategy from the DMAI (see exhibit 6.1 above) in their region and after input from its members, RTO4 initiated the development plans for the tourism strategy in the LC location; ‘[LC Municipalities] – DestinationNext’ which focuses on improving the region (which incorporates the LC) as a heritage destination;

Heritage Towns were determined to be one of five Demand Generator themes that [the] RTO and its constituent [LTOs] agreed to focus on in the 2011 Role and Function development sessions (RTO).

After this decision, research was commissioned on the four heritage towns in the region which found that;

The market readiness of the four identified assets in [the RTO region], [LC location and other towns in the RTO region], is markedly different and requires an individualized and differentiated approach. As an identified Demand Generator theme, [the RTO] “Heritage Towns (HT’s)” remain under-utilized assets and yet these four “towns” [LC location and three other towns in the RTO region] have considerable brand equity built up over their (almost) 200 years (RTO).

As a result of these findings the RTO contacted the LTO in the LC location to ask if they would be interested in ‘getting on board’. The RTO offered the LTO the opportunity to apply for funding to support them in increasing community engagement and in building the LC municipalities as a destination, as Emma explains;

We [LTO] had a chance to get this funding [from the RTO] and I asked [Liam: Senior Council representative] to consider it. I have to have your buy in and he [Liam] said then we [township] have to make it [tourism] part of the strategic plan ... and it’s written right in, so that we are fulfilling what we [township] said we would do to the constituents ... it had to tie in and I recognise that.

It is clear from the above quote that strategic planning in the township is very important. It also highlights that tourism was not a major part of the townships strategic plan prior to the funding opportunity from the RTO. After the LTO in the LC location agreed to ‘get on board’ with the tourism strategy, the RTO contracted the consulting firm that was part of the project team during the development of the DestinationNEXT strategy (see exhibit 6.1) to develop a one-on-one destination development project for the region in conjunction with the RTO and the township in the LC location. The RTO is underwriting the significant cost of the engagement. The RTO identified the consultant firm as;

leading edge in destination development and highly capable of fostering the community collaboration and stakeholder engagement necessary to achieving true success in developing [tourism communities] (RTO project overview).

The RTO wants to get the LC location to engage with this process to ensure the businesses within the LC municipalities are ready for the major commercial development of the local mill;

RTO is working more directly with [Ryan’s company (project manager on local mill development)] on their three year, [multi-million] investment ... This type of direct commercial investment is a welcome addition to the area but considerable work is needed to develop and execute a destination plan in concert with [local tourism

stakeholders] *to see that the local area is ready and capable of capitalizing on this enormous growth opportunity (RTO).*

Emma echoes the above sentiment;

[The] RTO had recognised and said this [major commercial development of the local mill] is going to come to your town so when it comes, when it's built, what are you [local tourism businesses and stakeholders] going to do to match up to it? ... I think that is sort of saying how are you going to do business in 2017/18 ... so you have got to be thinking about it.

The catalyst for formation of the LC emanated externally as a direct result of investment for the major revitalisation of the local mill. Emma explains that prior to LC formation this catalyst was articulated by RTO4 to the consultant firm to assist them with developing the tourism strategy for the LC location;

The business case has been presented [to the consultant firm]. We [LC municipalities] have a [multi-million] tourist project that is going to transform the face of [the LC municipalities] forever ... how can we [LTO] ensure that it is a welcomed strategy that will ... be equitable for everyone.

As Emma explained the RTO contracted the consultant firm to work with current LC members to try and build a tourism strategy that will '*be actionable and practical for everyone*'.

6.2.4 Structure and leadership

In March 2015 the consultant firm facilitated a meeting with LC members and the whole of the RTO. This meeting took place outside the LC location. The purpose of the meeting was to engage LC members in conversation and get their feedback on how they saw tourism in their region. At this meeting Emma explains that everyone had a say in the organisation side of LC meetings;

We [LC] had our first session ... it was an all-day [event] and ... a number of them [LC members] said we can do a half day but it's tough to get away for a whole day ... through the week it was determined that was better ... they [LC members] opted for through the day rather than to do it [meet] in the evening but they [LC members] were asked, they were consulted.

As the case study progressed the researcher observed that LC meetings were very much spearheaded by the RTO (specifically Michael) and the consultants (Owen and Madison). These individuals acted in a broker capacity in the LC. Michael, a senior member of the RTO, took a lead role in chairing the meetings. He outlined the proceedings for the day, and based on the researcher's observations, he tried to make sure all LC members felt like their participation mattered. This was evident from the very beginning of the third meeting in which the researcher was present as outlined in exhibit 6.2.

Exhibit 6.2: Defining the Structure

Michael began proceedings by outlining briefly what the LC had discussed in the previous workshops (one and two) and thanked members for their continued participation. He acknowledged that all the members were volunteering. Michael continued by outlining what this (the third) meeting was going to focus on and he used a whiteboard to illustrate the destination and where the various associations (LC businesses) fit. Emma later explains that this drawing put her mind at ease, as it illustrated that responsibility was going to be spread amongst all LC members and not just ‘*unloaded on the LTO*’;

It goes back to that drawing that [Michael] ... did [and] we [LC] all kind of learn[ed] [that] everybody has got a little bit ... this might not be your baby ... that makes me personally feel better because I am not walking away thinking how is [the LTO] going to do all of this stuff plus do our regular stuff.

Michael noted the importance of the motivations/ agendas of each individual tourism business to the successful implementation of the tourism strategy. He picked out Hannah’s business as an example; ‘*zip-lining is a new attraction to the area ... It is very unique and a beautiful way to discover the [river]*’. Michael reinforced that ‘*the [LC] needs to drive the strategy ... the consultants are there to help but at the end of the day you [LC stakeholders] need to take it into your own hands*’. Michael then proceeded to outline the value of the reports that the consultants (Owen and Madison) had put together noting the value of the findings as ‘*an aid for discussion*’. Michael explained that the findings would be discussed in the breakout sessions.

Before finishing introductions Michael reinforced the aim of the meeting; ‘*What are the biggest opportunities you [LC stakeholders] see in the LC municipalities that will assist with developing the LC location as a tourism destination*’ and asked if anyone had any questions. No one responded.

(Workshop observations).

The researcher observed Emma acted in a broker capacity in the LC at this meeting. Prior to the LC being established it was Emma who was asked to recommend tourism businesses to senior management in the township that she felt were appropriate to be part of the LC. Under the current LC structure, Sarah plays a central role which is predominantly administrative but she also acts as a tourism project manager for developing the tourist destination strategy. Sarah communicates occasionally via phone and email with Emma in between meetings to discuss LC practice and to assist her with planning future meetings. Sarah also liaises directly with Owen and Madison to plan and organise meetings and after consultation with them she sends out meeting invites and agendas to the other LC

members. Sarah also takes the minutes at each meeting and distributes them via email to LC members after each session. Hailey, a micro firm O/M, noted that the consultants and the RTO (Sarah) are very good at communicating to LC members prior to meetings. Hailey explains that members know well in advance the date, location and agenda of the next meeting and this encourages her continued participation in the LC;

They [consultants and Sarah] give us [LC] lots of notice, they send us materials early and it's always local. The first meeting was in [another location close to the LC municipalities] but ... now ... they [the meetings] have gone to [the LC location] its right nearby ... it works quite well for me.

6.2.5 Participation and identity

Prior to meetings LC members were encouraged to attend and contribute to meetings informally through conversations with Emma and more formally through an email invitation from Sarah;

The hands on workshop will encompass two breakout sessions; Destination Strength and Community Support & Engagement. Your input and ideas are valuable during the sessions in order to move toward strategy development. We look forward to seeing you on Thursday, August 27th, 2015 (Email: Meeting invite from Sarah).

However, it can be difficult to engage micro firms/ other tourism businesses in the practice of the LC as these businesses are resource constrained. Emma explains;

I have had people who have come [to LC meetings] and they have disappeared but I think the group [as] it stands are people who are committed to seeing this [strategy] through ... it's not just an eight month programme.

Within the LC, some micro firm O/Ms are at the periphery, they contact and meet each other occasionally in between meetings to discuss LC practice and potential business opportunities. These opportunities emerged from being part of the LC as Hannah explains;

It [LC meetings] has really built the relationships with the others that we didn't know so much [about] and deepened the relationships with the ones that we did know already ... really seeing how the consistency of meeting every week ... growing the bond and packages are starting to come together. I remember even two years ago where I would call a certain place and trying to get a package together and they [other tourism businesses] weren't really that interested. Now that we have met face to face ... I have already had two luncheons. We were invited over to discuss packages and they [other LC businesses] wanted to participate.

Hailey confirmed that she had met with Hannah to chat about potential business opportunities and that she did not know Hannah's business prior to LC meetings;

It became clear ... that I didn't understand her [Hannah's] business ... How she attracts people to the area versus how I attract people to the area ... we decided to have lunch and talk about promotional opportunities ... we had a great chat and I think for next summer we will be looking at other opportunities and maybe even before that.

Over the course of the research study a multitude of other reasons were observed to have influenced the participation of members in the LC. Emma's formal role is that of tourism coordinator for the LTO and she is considered as a tourism champion in the LC location by the tourism businesses in the LC. Hailey remarks that;

When [Emma] asks me to play ball I don't hesitate. She has got great ideas and enthusiasm and belief in this community ... She does it to an endless degree because it's her job but when she comes in here [to Hailey's business] and asks me for help I do whatever I can for her.

The latter quote suggests that Emma's involvement influences the tourism businesses' decision to get involved in the LC. This was reinforced by Hannah as she explains prior to the formation of the LC;

It sound[ed] like [Emma] really want[ed] me on this [LC committee] ... so I decided to read it [email invitation to be part of LC] and then I said okay yeah I will be a part of that [LC].

Hailey and Hannah commented that the development of the local mill was also a source of motivation for getting involved in the LC. Hailey notes that the potential spin-off benefits (such as more tourists coming to the LC municipalities) when the mill reopens in 2016 could be good for her business and she acknowledges the value of working with Ryan's large tourism business;

[Ryan's company] are the right people to be sitting with ... I know it's going to be great for my business [the revitalisation of the local mill]. People are going to want to sit by the water [and] people come to [LC municipality her business is located in] looking for Scottish and it is a little hard to find. Well, I am the Scottish pub on the river so people find me (Hailey).

Hannah feels her involvement in the LC has allowed her to have a voice in the future of tourism development in the LC location and she selects the local mill project as an example;

I am also very excited about my input [on the tourism strategy] actually coming to fruition even things like ... the kind of pool that I thought [Ryan's company] should put in and I think it is going to go in ... so my opinion matters and it's really neat to watch how I can say something and it is actually going to happen and become something.

Similar to Hannah, James (micro firm O/M and Local Business Administrator) notes that having an opportunity to put across his ideas without them getting knocked back immediately by other group members was a major motivation for his continuing involvement in the LC;

it's one of the best groups that I have belonged to where people don't boo boo [dismiss] your ideas ... people don't do that in this group they actually listen to what you have to say and let you air it [your opinion].

In addition, it seems the expected outcomes of the strategy were also a source of motivation for members to participate in the LC. An overview of the project and expected outcomes in the LC municipalities from an RTO perspective is depicted in exhibit 6.3 below.

Exhibit 6.3: Project Overview

A key priority [of the] RTO is leveraging the potential of our primary heritage town assets. [A consultant firm] has been engaged to work in partnership with [the] RTO and the township [in the LC municipalities] on a destination development project in [the LC municipalities]. [The] RTO is underwriting the significant cost of the [consultant] engagement. The goal of the project is four-fold:

- Grow the tourism economy in [the LC municipalities].
- Develop a strong destination marketing and management organisation to leverage the unique selling proposition (USP) of [the LC municipalities].
- To integrate the tourism strategy with the Township strategy.
- To ensure the [LC municipalities] and [wider region] brand is unique, recognised, valued and widely shared.

Strong Tourism Destinations

The key to successful destination development is relatively straight forward: highly engaged communities that take an active role in shaping their collective future. The best destinations have engagement across a broad spectrum of stakeholders, business, public, financial and a host of others, not just tourism and marketing entities. Strong destinations leverage their unique assets to differentiate themselves in the tourism market place. Their brand, the sum of shared stories and experiences about the destination is unique, recognised, valued and widely shared.

(RTO4 Project Overview Document, May 2015)

Despite the specific aims of the strategy, the anticipated outcomes varied from member to member, with each member wanting to focus on the potential outcome that would be more likely to have an impact on their own business. Hailey believed the municipality that her business was located in, was losing out on current and potentially future visitor spend, as the majority of other businesses in the municipality did not open on Sundays. She hopes a related outcome of the forthcoming tourism strategy would be to encourage the businesses to open at times that fulfilled tourist needs;

I mean part of the job of the [LC] is to set a plan in place to convince the stores in [one specific LC municipality] to be open on a Sunday afternoon ... If you walk down the street and three quarters of the stores are closed the town isn't open for business and I appreciate some people are closed for religious reasons ... and I have to respect that [but] on the other hand the town is losing out because if you aren't seen as a tourist destination on a Sunday you are never going to be seen as a tourist destination on a Tuesday (Hailey).

Hailey recognises that other micro firms in her municipality had their own reasons for restricting their opening times and hopes that ‘*when it comes to the [major festival] they [businesses] are open [on a Sunday] and maybe the [local mill] development will be more of an incentive for them [businesses] to open up*’. Hailey’s sentiment was noted as a potential opportunity to strengthen local community support for tourism in the key observations summary that incorporated findings from previous LC meetings and was produced and handed out by the consultants (Owen and Madison) to members at the fourth meeting;

The addition of [the redeveloped mill in the LC location] may positively change the perception of tourism within the business community.

Other micro firm O/Ms in the LC hoped that the tourism strategy would encourage businesses in one of the LC municipalities to recognise that they had a lot to offer to tourists;

Hopefully the [tourism strategy] programme will help [one specific LC municipality] realise its potential as its own destination to visit. It doesn’t need to say [the other LC municipality] is just down the street (James).

Similarly, more central members in the LC also had their own reasons as to why they have put more weight into certain anticipated outcomes of the strategy. For example, during a researcher interview with Emma, she reflected on the reporting structure for tourism and explained that it could be much more efficient. Emma hopes the tourism strategy will highlight the latter and this encourages her participation in the LC because she anticipates this would make her job easier;

I am in a situation where I am the one full time person [in the LTO] and ... everybody [else] is one day a week ... it’s hard to get momentum ... to be even able to share with ... my staff what we did yesterday [at the meeting] ... I am hoping going through the strategy, that is one of the things that will get shown ... we [LTO] could be much more efficient with the skills that we have and ... what we [LTO] are doing.

6.2.5.1 Awareness of responsibility/ contribution

The LC was launched in early 2015 and as of Autumn that same year the vast majority of non-central members did not have a formal role/ visible responsibility in the LC. Hailey notes; ‘*We [LC] haven’t gotten to a point yet where people [have] taken on responsibilities*

... *the only responsibility has been ... to show up [at the meetings]'*. As a consequence, Hannah feels she still does not understand what the practice of the LC is. She believes this is because nothing concrete has been achieved yet by the LC;

I guess I want things to move faster ... I feel like nothing has been done so I guess I am very much like ... here's the problem let's get it done, we [LC municipalities] need a bike trail let's get it done ... what do we [LC] need to do? We [LC] need to find money [then] we need to write to the government ... let's do that. I feel like we [LC] have been sitting around a lot talking but nothing is getting done, I don't see a plan ... I am kind of anxious to see what's going to happen, what are we [LC] doing?

Although Hannah didn't fully understand the practice of the LC at this time, she believes her input along with that of the other tourism businesses is going to be important to the success of the strategy. She explains that because the majority of tourism business O/Ms live and operate their businesses in either one or the other of the two LC municipalities, they can relay to those members of the group (which are not from the LC municipalities) what is happening on the ground;

I feel we [tourism business O/Ms] are putting in really good input for them [consultants and the RTO] ... because they don't know what the average user is thinking. A lot of people [in] the [LC] don't see what happens here as regards to how we [local tourism businesses] work together ... because they are not on the ground here ... on a day to day basis.

Hailey feels her attitude and business experience will really contribute to LC discussions;

I am a business woman who has a few good ideas and ... knows what she's doing ... I am game for anything ... I am open to [other] ideas [and] good business opportunities.

James deals with local businesses in the LC location on a day to day basis and he feels this will really contribute to the sustainability of the LC when the strategy is made public. James believes this was the reason why he was asked to join the LC; *'My keen knowledge of local business affairs I think is what identified me to the group as a good member to join'*.

The above suggests that the micro firms are very aware of the potential value their contributions will make to the development of the strategy. Observations at the third workshop confirm that more central members in the LC have recognised this, as the

consultants and Michael (see exhibit 6.2) regularly thanked members during the meeting for their contributions to LC discussions; *'This is a great conversation and I [Owen] would like to thank everyone again for their valuable contributions'*. However, at this stage of the strategies development the responsibilities of less central members are elusive, as Emma explains; *'[Responsibilities] will start to come with the steps identified in the strategic plan and we [LC] start to roll out some of the role and function'*.

6.2.5.2 Learning community membership and boundary

Emma explains that the LC is a closed group in that a certain number of tourism businesses in the LC location were selected by her to be part of the LC based on a multitude of criteria;

They [invited tourism businesses] are all forward thinking, they [invited tourism businesses] are all pretty much like-minded ... [the tourism businesses] that have been selected recognise the value of coopetition¹⁹ ... are pretty civil ... [and] very action orientated.

Emma is well aware that it can be difficult to sustain engagement in community projects as businesses come and go. She believes it is her duty to select tourism businesses that would not disappear after one meeting;

I find that the biggest nemesis of working in community projects [is] people come and go and it's so fluid ... For me, it was really important that I got a group together that were people that I knew that were here [in the LC location] for the long haul.

Emma also considered the personal circumstances of the O/Ms of the tourism businesses when selecting LC members; *'Someone like [Olivia] would be brilliant however it's just [pause] two businesses, three young kids like I mean just realistically sometimes it just doesn't work out'*. Emma expressed her disappointment when senior management (Liam and Joseph) chose other businesses over the ones she had initially recommended as membership had to be approved at senior level in the township. However, for the strategy to progress Emma decided not to question their decisions;

I was more disappointed when senior management would choose someone else over someone [a tourism business] I had recommended ... I recognise that they [senior

¹⁹ Relates to businesses working mutually through a combination of individual competition and collective collaboration (Tinsley and Lynch, 2007).

management] *had their own selfish reasons as to why they wanted certain people there. Me for the greater good just wanted the project moving forward.*

Emma explains that she does have regrets about the configuration of the LC and that she is still trying to convince senior management that certain businesses would be an asset to the LC; *'I am still lobbying to get [Leah] ... there [to LC meetings] ... someone pretty vocal, and I think [Leah] is a pretty vocal person'*. Emma confirmed that the LC is a closed group in that only those invited can attend;

This particular group [LC1] is a targeted group ... and this is the very first meeting of people [micro firms and other tourism/ rural development stakeholders] that have been invited to be part of the [group] ... [so] the meetings are selective yes certainly.

As a consequence it was highlighted in the meeting minutes that some of the suggestions made by LC members (i.e. micro firms/ other tourism businesses) which required input from individuals who were external to the LC at that time, could not be acted upon;

Several suggestions include[d] having Halloween figures floating down the river during the week of Halloween or lilies floating down the river during a week in the spring. The [River Conservation Authority] would need to be involved in order to make it happen.

In addition, the river was highlighted as a driving force behind one of the expected outcomes of the strategy which was to turn the LC municipalities into an overnight destination; *'The [river] presents great opportunities for it [LC location] to become an established weekend getaway destination'* (Meeting minutes). However the researcher observed that no businesses/ stakeholders associated with the river were asked to be part of the LC.

Once the LC businesses had been chosen, Emma explains it was then her responsibility to encourage them (micro firms/ other tourism businesses) to continue attending each session;

It's really the task of keeping the [LC] together ... so that's my biggest heartache at this moment and time ... [I] need to convince people [tourism businesses] that this [tourism strategy] is still a good project and worth the effort and I think that was made a bit easier by actually selecting those [tourism businesses] to be part of the group.

6.2.6 Evolution of learning community practice

After logistics had been agreed upon by all LC members at the first LC meeting in March 2015, a workshop programme commenced in April. The researcher was not present at the first two workshops and information in relation to these was obtained from a number of second hand sources. These included LC documents (i.e. project background, meeting agendas and minutes, and guides handed out at workshops) supplied by Emma, interviews/ informal conversations with Emma and Hailey (via Skype) and access to publicly available information in relation to the evolution of the LC on the RTO4 website. A series of monthly/ bi-monthly workshops are planned over the coming year (2015/ 2016), the purpose of which is to nurture community collaboration and stakeholder engagement necessary to successfully develop the LC location as a heritage destination. The workshops are organised by the RTO in conjunction with the consultants (Owen and Madison). The second hand documents highlight that the consultants stimulated a lot of the conversation during the first two workshops. They provided the leadership and structure that was necessary to initially motivate LC member participation. Hailey confirmed that Owen and Madison facilitate all of the ideas and suggestions in the LC; '*they [the consultants] ask the questions*'.

As noted in exhibit 6.2 above, Michael reinforced to members that they needed to '*drive the strategy*' because he believed the transition of leadership from the consultants and RTO to them (i.e. micro firms/ LTO and township staff) would be '*much smoother*' if this was the case. However, a number of observations during the case study suggest that LC members may find it difficult to take up the leadership baton from the consultants and the RTO once they take a step back from the centre of practice. For example, a number of LC members noted time as a barrier to LC engagement. Hannah acknowledges that in their high tourist season, she (and other tourism business O/Ms) may not have the time to commit fully to the LC;

I would have loved if this whole thing [LC meetings] would have started in our low season like around October, start the first meeting and then go until April/ May and of course that's our low season. That's when we [micro firms and other tourism businesses] would have a lot more time and that's when everyone is not checking their watches or phones. I find that's difficult having it right in our busy season, it is a challenge. I think engagement would increase for other operators as well if it wasn't during their high season. In our low season people would have lots of time to think about tourism.

In addition, Emma feels things wouldn't work so well currently if the consultants were not part of the LC but she hopes that by the time the consultants do step back, the group would be capable of taking up the reins; '*by the time they [Owen and Madison] are not there, I think this group will be [capable of functioning], yeah I do*'. Emma recognises that she currently lacks the skills to take the leadership baton and drive the strategy once the consultants/ RTO members take a back seat;

I am going to be really bold with these guys. Somebody [RTO] is paying big bucks for them [consultants] and I want them to help me because I don't guarantee that I have the skill sets. This is whole new turf for me.

Even at this early stage in the strategy's development researcher observations suggest a certain level of support is necessary to sustain the LC in the longer term. However some LC members also demonstrated signs of passive learning to the detriment of emerging autonomy. Table 6.3 below outlines some of these observations.

Table 6.3: Support, Denied or Passive Learning and Emerging Autonomy

LC member	Support	Denied or passive learning	Emerging LC autonomy
Emma	<p><i>They [consultants] are going to make sure that we [LC] are faced with the right questions and I believe that they are going to help us look for a solution;</i></p> <p><i>They [consultants] are not leaving you at your own demise ... They're going to be with us to see it [strategy] through to fruition;</i></p> <p><i>We [LC] are really going to take their [consultants] lead;</i></p> <p><i>They're [consultants] shepherding.</i></p>	<p><i>I think [the consultants are] assisting us [LC] by taking out a lot of the minute taking and a lot of the paper so they're allowing people like myself to participate with not feeling like I have to take copious notes;</i></p> <p><i>I personally on behalf of our department plan to utilise the consultants as much as I possibly can so it's like '[Owen] feed me'.</i></p>	<p><i>I am going to really encourage these guys [consultants] to give me a template that I can follow;</i></p> <p><i>What do you [consultants] think my next steps should be?;</i></p> <p><i>[Asked consultants] How can we [LC] create programmes that will educate everyone?.</i></p>
James	<p><i>I find it hard to figure things out on my own.</i></p>	<p><i>How nice it was I only needed to just be able to give my ideas and somebody else [Sarah] captured them and then they [Sarah and consultants] took it to the next level and captured it again.</i></p>	<p><i>I think ... we [LC] need to look at [the strategy] in terms of the long-run not just short-term. We have got to plan how we implement it [the strategy].</i></p>
Hailey	<p><i>I don't know how we [LC] make the case but I am also hoping that the [consultants] are going to help us figure out how we [LC] are going to do that.</i></p>	<p><i>While we [LC] take a break they [consultants] put together answers or findings.</i></p>	<p><i>I know we [LC] need the community buy in first ... we have got to take that step.</i></p>
Hannah	<p><i>[Asks Michael] Can we [LC] combine [my business] with nightlife?</i></p>	<p><i>[Asks Michael] Am I an entertainment attraction?</i></p>	<p><i>I think sample itinerary [outlining activities in the LC location] is needed ... so tourists can choose what they want to do ... from that.</i></p>

Before outlining the remaining LC events (up until Autumn 2015), a summary of the workshops in chronological order is provided here for clarity (see table 6.4).

Table 6.4: Summary of Learning Community Events

Timeline	Event	Purpose	Information source
March 2015	Introduction meeting	To plan logistics	Second hand
April 2015	Self-assessment workshop	Determine what scenario (see appendix E) the LC location falls under	Second hand
June 2015	Asset mapping workshop	Identify the tourism assets the LC location already has that draw visitors to the area	Second hand
August 2015	Key findings workshop incorporating break-out sessions	Review findings from previous workshops and generate consensus on opportunities and conclusions	First hand: Researcher was present at this workshop

6.2.6.1 Negotiation of practice

The first workshop (April 2015) concentrated on an individual assessment to identify how the LC location is currently performing in relation to tourism. The consultants provided examples of the variables they wished LC members to focus on; these variables fell under two scenario drivers (i.e. destination strength and community support and engagement) (see appendix F). The consultant firm explained in the self-assessment guide;

We [consultant firm] need to ensure that we are capturing the most relevant variables for both destination strength and community support and engagement.

LC members then had the chance to provide their own input on the variables by rating how relevant they felt the variables were. The technology to do this was supplied by the consultants and the results of the self-assessment were compiled by Owen. Emma explains;

When we [LC] did our individual assessment everyone actually had their own iPad which they [Owen and Madison] bought with them so it was actually great to have that technology because everybody kind of checked things off and then it went to [Owen] and ... he could very quickly but [the results] into a tabulated spreadsheet and we [LC] could be talking about the [results] in like five minutes.

The consultants built questions into each exercise to ensure everything was captured. LC members had the opportunity to give their ideas or comment on items as they completed the exercise;

Have we [consultants] missed any key variables? Are there any [variables] that you [LC members] think need to be clarified or changed? (Self-assessment guide: Workshop number one).

A number of LC members added their opinions and these were highlighted in the meeting minutes. The vast majority of these comments related to what members hoped the strategy would focus on including funding, the role of the LTO, governance and engaging external stakeholders to encourage them to keep their businesses open for longer at the weekends. The researcher noted that LC members (i.e. micro firms/ other tourism businesses/ LTO/ township) merely commented on potential barriers to broader engagement in the tourism strategy but did not offer any solutions. See table 6.5 for examples of LC member input.

Table 6.5: Input of Learning Community Members during Self-Assessment Workshop

Criteria	LC Member feedback
Funding Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a desire to best direct money into doing five things well, instead of doing 20 things not very well. • There is a need for Return on Investment (ROI) to be measured. The key is to demonstrate value. • ROIs are frequently not articulated or measured. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ People see roads and bridges as investment, but it is harder to quantify visitors coming to the area. ○ The quality of life for the resident is also a return that should be quantified.
Role and Function of [LTO]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The LTO role and function is not clear and shifts based on who is sitting at the table. There is a broader discussion that needs to occur about the roles and functions. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Currently a major role is for the [LTO] to market outside the town. ○ Activities should drive the budget, the budget should not drive the activity. ○ If you are marketing to locals, there is a question if the Business Improvement Area should play a part of that as well? • There is a need to leverage and align what [the region] is doing by using consistent vocabulary and pushing the same assets. • How would local businesses/ operators respond to a tourism tax? An operator mentioned they would not want to tax locals because the locals are the people who keep the businesses running in the winter. • Tourism operators would want to ensure that their competitors had to pay as well.
Governance Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A governance model has to be born out of the destination itself, and what makes sense in that destination. There is still some disagreement at the council level about where tourism should be located [Community or Economic Developments].
Stakeholder Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We need to engage our locals in order to stay open and survive the off season, and a big part of this success is to be consistent. • There is a lack of nightlife availability. If you want to become an overnight destination, there needs to be nightlife. • Some operators see themselves as being a tourism business. They need to know how important they are to the tourism experience. • Half of the businesses in [one LC municipality] do not rely on tourists. • How do we convince them to come together and be consistent in terms of hours? We need people open to have a vibrant downtown. <p>(Meeting minutes: April 2015).</p>

The results of the self-assessment exercise demonstrated a consensus amongst LC members and that there is room for improving tourism in the LC municipalities;

The result of the self-assessment placed [the two municipalities] as a destination ... that represents a developing destination with weak community support and engagement. It was encouraging that all participants [LC members] placed the [two municipalities] in this category, demonstrating consensus on the need for improvement (Meeting minutes).

The second workshop took place in June (2015) and concentrated on asset mapping. Prior to this workshop, it was noted in previous meeting minutes that a series of one-on-one interviews would take place between the consultants and LC members to get an idea of the tourism assets in the LC location. However, Hailey (micro firm O/M) explains that she was not asked to be part of this process. She notes that her only responsibility to date has been; *‘to show up [at the meetings] ... [and] participate in the meetings’*.

The goal of the asset mapping workshop was to gather data on the assets in the LC location that draw most tourists to the area. The consultants noted a number of ‘principles for success’ in the meeting agenda to encourage LC members to continue to participate in the practice of the LC. These are outlined in exhibit 6.4 below.

Exhibit 6.4: Asset Mapping Session: Principles for Success

- Asset mapping sessions are;
 - lively, inviting and positive experiences;
 - inclusive and constructive brainstorming events, with no “right” or “wrong” input;
- Facilitation provides full participation, sufficient input flow, and productive outcomes;
- Assets will be defined and expanded upon as completely and precisely as possible;
- Asset mapping benefits are directly proportional to the quality and quantity of the information generated.

(Meeting Agenda)

In addition, Emma noted the consultants put together a template outlining all the assets in the location prior to this workshop, gathered from both the one-to-one interviews and previous meetings. This formed the basis for discussion at the second workshop. According to Emma;

The asset mapping overview that we [LC] participated in ... [looked] at the desired outcomes of what we [LC] wanted to do in a mapping strategy and a description, and we actually participated in that together ... we [LC] got an asset map template that was put together by them [Owen and Madison] [and] ... we [LC] had a chance to go through that and review it, everything was listed and they [Owen and Madison] had taken [at the first meeting] an inventory of all our businesses, all our parks and then that’s what we [LC] kind of assessed, [to see] was that realistic.

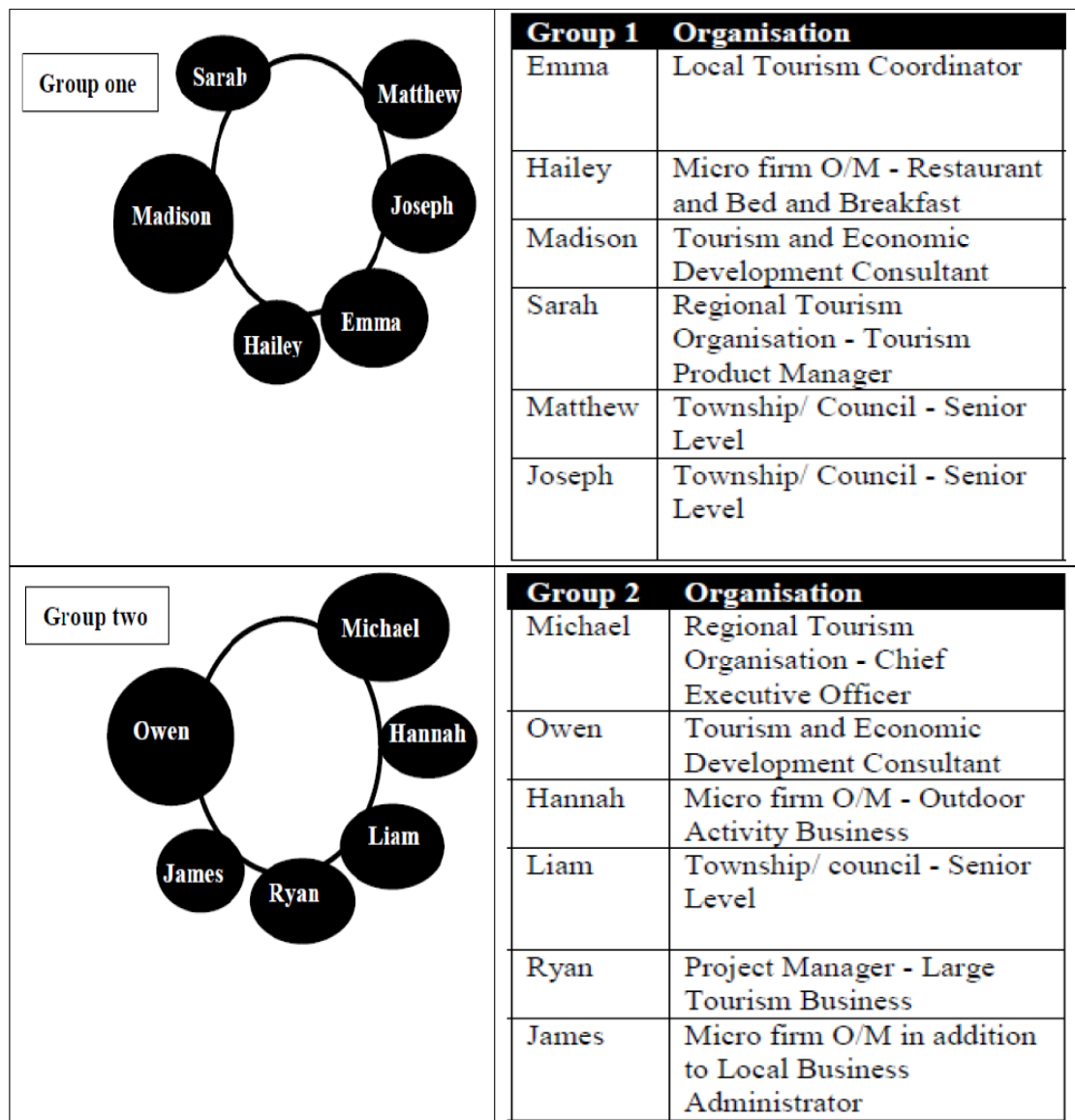
After the second workshop (June 2015) the consultants put a key findings report together outlining the twenty variables that had been identified as important by LC members gathered from previous sessions which included: attractions and entertainment, events, funding support and development (see appendix F for full list). The focus of the third workshop (August 2015) was then outlined by the consultants in the meeting guide;

The key observations [from the in-depth analysis of the twenty variables] will be validated by the [LC] at an upcoming workshop [August 2015], which will then be used to inform the development of the tourism strategy.

The third workshop entailed reviewing the findings report and it allowed LC members to discuss the conclusions and opportunities that Owen and Madison had drawn from the report. The researcher was present at this workshop. During the session the LC was split into two groups to discuss the findings. Group one moved to an adjacent room. Owen notes that the reason for this is *'because there is an echo in one room'*. Owen and Madison decided what variables each group would focus on and they also chose which members would sit in each group. Madison explains; *'we [consultants] want to ensure there is a good balance of people in each group'*.

The composition of the two groups is illustrated below in figure 6.2.

Figure 6.2: Break-out Sessions: Composition of the Groups and Room Layout



After introductions had been made (by the consultants and Michael) and the findings of the report had been presented (by the consultants) to members, the break-out sessions began. To reiterate, the researcher was present at this third workshop. LC members were assigned into group one and two by the consultants (see figure 6.2 above). When the break-out sessions came to a close after approximately 30 minutes, one individual from each group was nominated by the other members to present back on the discussions they just had. Hailey presented on behalf of group one and James presented on behalf of group two.

James feels it can be difficult to leave your biases aside during group discussions but the composition of group two allowed him to comment on the current reporting structure for tourism. James explains;

Despite the fact that [Michael] at the beginning said check all your reservations at the door... that's impossible to do ... [Joseph] was in the other group to me [one of the senior managers in the township] and we [group two] were discussing structure within the [township] and I used the opportunity of [Joseph] not being at the table to air my opinion that I thought the reporting structure for tourism was our keg [downfall]. I would never have said that if [Joseph] was sitting at the table despite the fact that I have been encouraged to check [my reservations] at the door.

The researcher observed that the mix of LC members in group two was uneven in terms of heterogeneity. Hannah recognised this and commented on the composition of the group and why she would have liked to have been part of the other group. Hannah explains;

I did notice that my group was heavily male ... and I would have liked to [have been] in the group that were discussing things [variables] that pertain to me more ... it's just personal because from what I do like those things [variables] that were being discussed in her group] don't matter to me, the other topics [variables] did.

As a consequence, the researcher noted that the composition of group two hindered Hailey's depth of involvement in group negotiations. Following the break-out sessions at the third workshop the consultants then asked LC members to discuss the variables in the findings report through 'a visitor's lens'. However, when members started to discuss sports tourism it seemed that a previous decision that was made by the township to move tourism from the economic department to the community services department (as referred to in section 6.2.1 above) impeded negotiation within the group. During interview Emma explains that tourism and community services needs to be separated;

It is amazing how people look at things differently, someone from the community would say that's a great asset but there again it's not a selling feature from a tourism standpoint.

Emma feels that because Joseph is manager of the community services department in the township, he lacks the expertise to discuss sports tourism through a visitor's lens;

[Joseph] was really trying to push that we [LC location] could be a [sports] destination ... I think [Joseph was] looking at it [sports tourism] through a community lens as opposed to through a visitor lens.

Other LC members recognised that sports tourism is not something the group should focus on;

I am going to reinforce [Matthew's argument] that our resources are not there yet. I mean someone is needed to point people to places in town from sports tourism and we [LC location] don't have [those] resources yet (Michael – meeting observation).

6.2.6.2 Learning community collaboration

Hailey believes that the presence of the consultants at LC meetings may actually be hindering collaboration amongst members but she acknowledges that if the consultants were not involved in the LC, the pursuit of a strategy may never reach fruition. She drew on an example of a previous committee she sat on which did not have a leading facilitator;

I sat on a fundraising committee for the hospital a year ago and we did not have an overseeing power like a consultant ... we [fundraising committee] just did it and got each other's emails and there was a flurry of activity and we got the job done. So in some ways maybe having the overseeing [consultant] is making sure it [strategy] gets done and I have nothing but good things to say about the [consultants] but I feel like ... we [LC] are still not on a first name basis in some cases and that could be just because we [LC] have had only [a few] meetings and someone [consultants] is facilitating and they are asking the questions.

Similarly, Hannah felt that not knowing other members in the LC was negatively impacting the practice of the group. At the first couple of meetings Hannah noted that everyone was given the opportunity to introduce themselves and briefly state what business they were associated with. Hannah feels this exercise really improved communication and collaboration within the LC;

At every meeting we [LC members] should introduce ourselves, even though ... you think that everybody knows everyone but that's not the case ... some of the other people who are in the [township] you don't always remember who is where all the time especially if you have a lot going on. It would be nice if everyone had a minute ... just to say who they are, who they represent ... just to refresh everyone again [and] it would be really good for networking to. You forget their names, you don't want to ask and the situation is much nicer if you just do introductions at the start by going around to everyone.

Hailey reinforced Hannah's comments but expressed a need to make greater attempts to encourage deeper collaboration and engagement amongst members. Hailey explains;

We [LC] have [had] a couple [of] roundabouts to introduce [ourselves] so people know who's in the room but that's not enough. Yes there is a race track like I said I don't know anything about horse racing ... I don't know the name of the guy that comes from the racetrack and I am sure he doesn't know my name and so there's no sense of

collaboration ... It's [racecourse] not far away just on the out skirts of [the LC municipality] and it has an event called industry day ... we [LC] [were] doing an event at the last meeting and we [LC] [were] told to rank the importance for tourism of different events and when it came to industry day I put it really low because I didn't know what industry day was. Apparently it's the biggest racing day of the year that everybody in the industry goes to.

Hailey suggested during interview that it might be a good idea if the consultants sent out a bit of background information on each member of the group so everyone knows who they are talking to and what they do. James noted that he knew the majority of LC members prior to its formation, as administrator for the BIA he deals with tourism businesses in the LC municipalities on a day-to-day basis. As a consequence of these relationships with the broader businesses community, the LC may find it easier to engage external tourism businesses in the tourism strategy when it is made public as a mutual understanding is already present between some LC businesses and those external to the group. In addition, James feels this has made it easier for him to participate in the practice of the LC and voice his concerns about certain aspects that may influence the development of the strategy;

We [LC] are lucky because we live in a small community so the reality is sitting at that table yesterday I knew everyone who was there and they all knew me ... there is ... that level of familiarity. We [LC members] know each other's personalities, we know each other's temperaments ... and we choose our words in a way to not offend ... we actually feel that we can talk more openly because this person [other LC member] knows how [I] feel already, it's no secret. A good example was ... I struggled with saying I believe ... retailers in [one specific LC municipality] are ill-equipped to function with what is going to happen to the town when [the local mill] finally opens and [Liam] actually thanked me for saying that because it's something that has been felt at township level for a long time and it was either refreshing or interesting for them [senior management of the township] to know that [as] a business leader in the community ... I have recognised that.

This is in contrast to the experience of Hailey and Hannah (documented above) and the different dynamics between group one and two as some members actively contributed to dialogue while others didn't converse and as a result did not contribute to LC negotiations at all. However, Emma explains that the level of communication at the third workshop was comparatively good when compared to past experience; *'She [Sarah] was so pleased with the amount people talked ... that was amazing compared to what we [LC] have had before'*. Emma acknowledges that those members who do contribute a lot have value in what they say; *'some people ... just love to hear themselves talk so therefore they do a lot of talking but with that they have value in what they say'*. However, all conversation does not necessarily contribute to the creation of the strategy. Hannah explains that she feels

annoyed when members start to talk about things that are not related to the practice of the group but she does acknowledge that some stories are entertaining;

Certainly there are tonnes of people who go off on tangents and talk about different things. It is entertaining but in terms of time sometimes it's really like we [LC] need to focus here but again it is entertaining sometimes and you want to hear the stories.

Hailey explains that one of the challenges of fully participating in the LC is trying to balance competition between certain members;

One of the challenges in the group is myself and [another specific tourism business] are in the room and I consider them direct competition. I am not going to talk about some of my new initiatives because I don't want them [other tourism business] to know. I have been known to pull people [consultants or RTO members] aside afterwards because I understand the need for the big picture ... I have made a point of not mentioning certain projects ... because that would take from my uniqueness. That is one challenge within the group ... because of similar interests that could compete against each other.

Another aspect which is impacting collaboration in the LC is the stark divide between the two municipalities that form the LC location. However, James explains that over the past two years the wall that divides the two municipalities has started to break down;

I have never known two communities to hate each other so much and I think it's because they are in such close proximity to each other; it is easy to develop a hatred for each other. The conflict between [the LC municipalities] is a humanitarian thing, it's personalities, it's identification ... [but] I would confess that within the last ... 12-18 months there has been more receptiveness and more willingness within both communities at least from an administration level to work together towards common goals ... the actual animosity between organisations has broken down.

This divide was also bleeding into the LC as Hailey notes;

I can tell you for sure, you're either from [one municipality or the other] and when I am talking tourism I make a point of including [both municipalities] but a lot of people like ... [Hannah] in these meetings she never talks about [both municipalities].

As of Autumn 2015 there has been no communication to micro firms and/ or other rural tourism development stakeholders outside of the LC. However, the data suggests some LC members have started to think about how the strategy is going to be communicated to external stakeholders but this had not yet been negotiated amongst LC members during the term of this research study.

6.2.7 External relationships

Emma hopes that she can share some light information with tourism businesses external to the LC but she explains that the consultants and RTO members will need to give her the go ahead first;

I am all about feeding the right words ... when [the consultants are] gathering the information that took place yesterday, it's like give me some good sound bites that I can communicate to my members ... I would like to relay to that group [LTO members] what took place yesterday and I hope that I am going to get permission [from the consultants and RTO members] ... I am very conscious that I don't want someone [consultants or RTO members] to say to me don't share the information.

However, some businesses currently external to the group knew about the LC and what stage it was at, suggesting that some LC members were willing to share information to external individuals if asked to; *'I see ... the workshops are coming out [starting to take place]... I think the communication is really good from the committee'* (Leah). Hailey explains that if someone external to the LC came to her with an idea, she would have to run it by the 'higher powers' in the LC before inviting them to the meetings;

if they [external stakeholders] came to me and had some ideas I would ... contact [Emma] and say [an external tourism stakeholder] has got a great idea we [LC] should invite them to the next meeting. I don't know if the higher power [consultants/ RTO4] would be open to that I would have to check in advance.

A number of LC members noted that the group was not ready to communicate the strategy to external stakeholders. Hannah believes that LC members need to democratically negotiate the strategy's focus before communicating it to others. Hannah feels this process would enhance the LC members (including the consultants and RTO members) understanding of the strategy and its development once made public;

I don't know if other people [external stakeholders] know what's really going on and I don't think they are ready to either because we [LC] are the steering committee and we are trying to focus ideas ... we [LC] don't have anything to tell people yet. I suppose we [LC] have to agree on the strategy first before it's shared with everyone else [external stakeholders].

James reinforces the above sentiment noting;

I think there is a conscious effort at this point to refrain [from sharing information with external stakeholders], to get it clear in our heads first. We [LC] are not even at the end

of the process yet, once we get to the end of the process we will let everyone know. I think we [LC] need to get there before we discover how we are going to get the message out.

The researcher observed that the consultants articulated to LC members that it only takes one external business to object to the strategy for it to be delayed for a year or more. Hailey, Emma and Ryan contemplated how the LC is going to promote broader engagement amongst external stakeholders. Hailey explains;

We [LC] are still trying to figure out what needs to be communicated and the best tactics to do that. We [LC] don't have any strategies and until we have strategies we can't formulate our tactics to make it known [to external stakeholders].

Once the strategy is finalised, Hailey believes that promoting broader engagement; *'depends on how we launch it [strategy] and present it to the people'*. Emma speculates how the LC would communicate to external businesses and she anticipates that members will start to discuss a more inclusive structure at the next meeting;

Part of the communicative structure [to external micro firms and/ or other rural tourism development stakeholders] is going to be a position where there's some sort of forum or platform for people who can then feed in the ideas.

Currently, the LC location does not have a recognisable tourism brand. The consultants made it clear in the meeting minutes that *'the tourism brand should follow the strategy and not the other way around'*. Emma echoed Michael's comments at the third workshop that external businesses could be integrated into the strategy through the development of a tourism brand once the strategy is made public;

The importance of our brand and our story ... we need to ensure that the community is working in tandem with tourism and it can be overwhelming how you will get things done.

Ryan argued that external stakeholders needed to realise that things must change and that their business is part of the tourism sector for the strategy to be sustainable. He believed the best way to do this is through an education programme to show the external businesses what is in the strategy for them and hopefully by doing this they will get on board. Ryan explains;

Some residents [in LC location] don't want things to change and therefore there needs to be an education piece outlining what it [strategy] is going to bring to them (Meeting observation).

Emma agreed with Ryan and explained;

A lot of time, energy and financial support goes into various programmes ... but at the end of the day such programmes are not sustainable if businesses don't see what's in it for them. I agree [with Ryan] we [LC] need to educate people that they are in the tourism sector (Meeting observation).

The researcher observed that the consultants took note of these points centering on issues of achieving broader engagement and Owen commented;

The idea of an education programme coming out as the strategy; we [LC] will discuss that the next day (Meeting observation).

Subsequent interviews with LC members and other tourism businesses external to the strategy revealed that a number of factors may potentially influence external member's willingness to participate in the strategy and these are outlined next.

6.2.7.1 Barriers of engagement with external tourism businesses

LC members are well aware that there is only so much that the group can achieve until they gain broader participation in the tourism strategy from external micro firms and other rural tourism development stakeholders. Hailey notes;

I think everybody who is sitting on the steering committee is game for anything because we [LC members] bought in. We know this is a great opportunity for us but everybody isn't in the room ... part of the challenge [will be] to convince the people that aren't in the room to get involved or at least play ball.

Hailey anticipates that it may be difficult for LC members to influence other tourism business O/Ms external to the group to change the way they operate, particularly those in business a long time;

I would say half the people in the room are not from [the LC municipalities] ... they [external micro firms and other tourism businesses] don't really know who these people are so their not going to listen to them. Will they listen to me? I would be surprised ... I am still only here four years so the guy in the men's clothing store down the street has

been here for ever, the jeweller has been here for ever in a day and will I have any influence on them what so ever no I can't imagine ... I don't think they are going to listen to me and there might be a seniority thing going on to.

Another barrier to broader engagement of the strategy was noted by Ryan and Hannah. They reflected on their past experience in dealing with people in the LC location and remarked that some locals resist change when it can potentially impact their daily lives. Ryan stated;

We wanted to allow people to do rock climbing on our property but [the] attitude from [the LC municipalities] was that you can't do that, this is [our] town and do not change it (Meeting observation).

In the past, Hannah also had a similar experience to Ryan;

I went to community through social media to change a walk in [the LC municipality] and I got [many] replies not to change it (Meeting observation).

Emma feels that there would be various types of commitment among external members about participating in the strategy when it is made public;

really from them [the external businesses] ... [they] will benefit from it [strategy] [but] they [the external businesses] don't necessarily put up their hand up to get involved and other [businesses will] think it's great.

Emma believes that when external members first hear about the strategy they will just store it in the back of their minds, as it may not have an immediate practical impact on their business. She recounted her experience on a past project in the LC location;

it's like with most things.. it was like that with the library ... it was the eleventh hour and they [builders] were ready to put a shovel in the ground and then everybody [micro firms and other tourism businesses] ... went you are doing what? ... you talk about communication ... you can put it in newspapers, you can put it on Facebook and ... you can have open meetings ... half of the time we only listen to what we want to ... when it affects us at one particular time because we [micro firms and other rural tourism development stakeholders] are all so busy ... it's like ... do I need to know this now? No I don't.

During interviews a number of micro firms external to the LC expressed very strong views on the revitalisation of the local mill. Rose and Alice (who both run tourism businesses in the LC location and are currently external to the LC) hopes Ryan's company, who are

carrying out the development on the local mill, would not change the heritage of the town when the complex is open. Alice explains;

Hopefully no chains [franchises] are coming [to the complex] ... They [Ryan's company] say they are going to promote the local small business people and let's hope they stick to it because it would be pretty sad [if they didn't]. It would change the feeling of the place if they bring in all the chains [franchises]. A lot of people buy local here and a lot of people come here to support that.

Emma believes that Ryan's company will select businesses which appeal to tourists and as a result she has already connected a confectionary shop with Ryan's company. Emma explains;

They [Ryan's company] will pick [shops] that their clientele want ... that's why I connected [a local confectionary shop] with those people [Ryan's company] and it's like ... you [the confectionary shop owner] need to be in there [complex] ... don't let them go with another franchise.

The researcher noted that Ryan's company does not have a feel for the local community and therefore they will select shops which will suit their needs over the wishes of business owners in the community. Rose explains that if Ryan's company does not comply with the current practice in the LC location, they will be met with resistance from the majority of local businesses;

There are people who will go ... wait a second ... it [the renovated local mill] has bit into the heritage of what we do here ... It's going to be the movers and shakers of [the local municipality] who get together and say ... this is not sounding good and there's a lot of great activist type people in [the LC municipality] who will take it in hand and usually a small group has a strong enough voice.

Rose also notes how a culture of self-interest in the wider business community has impacted how she works with other business O/Ms;

I used to try and organise stuff [events] all the time for the entire community but there is enough negative people that I just stopped. What I do now is I work with people who I like personally and we get together for drinks outside of the boundaries of [formal organisations] ... I don't have time for the politics, I don't want to inherit negative people ... People are a little bit more out for themselves with the exception of about probably twenty per cent which I consider to be the elite, the people who are actually looking at a macro level not just their own business ... even if it's [events] not making you money that exact day you are giving people a good impression of [both LC municipalities] ... I don't think a lot of people have that attitude which is an important attitude to have.

This quote suggests that the LC may find it difficult to engage external micro firms/ other tourism businesses in the strategy if short-term benefits are not visible to them. Similar to James and Hannah's comments; Olivia (who owns a restaurant and pub in the LC location) notes that a divide exists between the LC municipalities even though they are bundled together for tourism purposes; '*We [LC municipalities] don't do any tourism events together. It's really crazy right ... so close but super separated*'. This could potentially impact broader engagement and the sustainability of the LC in the future.

6.2.8 Case summary

The tourism strategy aims to enhance community engagement in tourism development and build the LC location as a destination. The catalyst for collaboration amongst LC members stems from the redevelopment of the local mill. LC members were selected to be part of the group by Emma based on a multitude of criteria which included personality/ behavioural traits and the personal circumstances of the business O/M. These members then had to be approved by Liam and Joseph (Senior Council representatives) before being formally asked by Emma to be part of the LC. Once members had been selected the LC met for the first time in March 2015 and all members were given an opportunity to discuss logistics at this meeting. Prior to this meeting the vast majority of LC members did not know other members or their businesses.

As the practice of the LC evolved the researcher observed central members had formal visible roles in the LC while members at the periphery (i.e. micro firms/ other tourism businesses) did not. However, peripheral members did recognise the value they added to LC negotiations. Owen, Madison (consultants) and Michael (RTO4) acted in a broker capacity and stimulated a lot of the conversation during meetings. They employed a didactic approach to communication to other LC members. As time passed shared meaning developed amongst members and they started to understand the practice of the LC.

There has been no communication of the strategy's development to businesses external to the group and therefore it is a closed LC. The case findings highlight that the group has

many concerns about moving forward and taking the strategy to the wider local business / stakeholder community. Criteria including being able to demonstrate value from engaging in the strategy to external businesses suggest that the LC may find it difficult to achieve broader engagement once the strategy is made public. LC members (i.e. micro firms/ other tourism businesses) stated a number of other potential barriers to broader engagement in the tourism strategy including the diversity of businesses in the LC municipalities, and that half of the LC members that are perceived by other members to have greater influence in the LC (i.e. consultants/ RTO members) do not live in the LC location. In addition, external businesses also commented that the local mill redevelopment could be met with resistance from local businesses if it changed the culture in the LC location.

A summary of key Canadian case findings is outlined in table 6.6 below. Following this the findings from the Welsh case community are outlined.

Table 6.6: Key Canadian Case Findings

Learning theme	LC1 - Canada
LC aim	Build a community capacity in tourism and develop the LC location as a destination
Catalyst for collaboration	External catalyst dictated rules of engagement - multi-million local mill redevelopment
Structure and leadership	<p>Rigid, closed group;</p> <p>Membership - strict selection criteria and boundary;</p> <p>Responsibilities: core members (visible) versus peripheral members (elusive);</p> <p>Communication is didactic; consultants and RTO4 facilitate LC meetings.</p>
Participation and identity	<p>Core members encourage participation both formally (emails) and informally (conversations);</p> <p>Identity development stifled beyond dominant broker core - influenced by member responsibility in the LC;</p> <p>Participation influenced by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Formal and community/ voluntary roles; local tourism champion key in encouraging wider participation; -Anticipated outcomes of the tourism strategy by members; -Constrained resources of micro firm O/Ms; -Balancing coopetition; -Trust.
Interrelationships	<p>Discussion of potential business opportunities amongst LC businesses encourages greater cohesiveness;</p> <p>Evident disconnect between the LC businesses/ location and consultants/ RTO4 members;</p> <p>Influenced by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Selection criteria; -Power dynamics; core members (RTO; consultants and large business) have more influence in the LC than peripheral members (micro firms); -Potential tangible/ intangible benefits to LC members; -Impact of privately funded local mill development; -Historical tensions that still divide the two municipalities that form the LC location.
Learning development	<p>Influenced by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Structure of tourism services in the LC location impacting learner autonomy; -Learning set: action bias impedes learner autonomy development; -Consultants facilitating workshops: members will find it difficult to take the leadership baton once

	<p>they step back; -Absence of a shared history amongst business O/Ms within the group hindering LC negotiations.</p>
External relationships	<p>Negotiation of strategy currently does not occur at community level;</p> <p>Broader engagement in the strategy once made public may be influenced by community politics;</p> <p>Some LC members contemplated:</p> <p>-Development of a tourism brand could assist with integrating external businesses into the strategy; -Education programme to highlight the value of the tourism strategy to external businesses in the LC location.</p>

6.3 Learning community 2 case profile: The location

In 2015, approximately 238,200 enterprises were active in Wales with micro firms representing 94.7 per cent of these total enterprises (National Statistics for Wales, 2015). The LC location is in the heart of a major national park in Wales and is unsurpassed in natural beauty. The surrounding region comprises many valleys, rivers, lakes and forests. The location has a population of approximately 4,800 and the local economy relies heavily on tourism. Historically, occupancy of the location is relatively new and dates back to the 18th century. The town was created as a result of the discovery of the slate strip in the area and therefore has a strong industrial heritage. By the early 20th century numerous slate quarries were established in the location and the population grew to be the second largest in the north of the country. During World War II a number of art treasures from galleries and royal palaces around the United Kingdom were stored in the slate quarries to protect them from bombings. The slate industry in the LC location employed 4,000 men in its prime, which contributed greatly to the local economy. A number of railways were built to provide transportation for the slate product and the growing population in the LC location. In addition, a hydro power station was built to provide electricity to the slate quarries. The town then became the first in the country to have its street lights powered by water. The location has suffered from the demise of the slate mining industry in the last three decades and records a higher than average level of unemployment, although employment appears to be growing over the past year.

Numerous cafes, pubs, grocery shops and accommodation options such as bed and breakfasts (B&Bs), a modern hotel and a campground operate in the LC location. The location also offers a bespoke boutique and gift shop. The location has a primary and secondary school and a multi-functional arts venue that provides training for young people in the area in film, journalism and design. However, the LC location currently lacks an entertainment venue and the availability of evening meals is also very limited.

In 2007 a social enterprise was set up in the LC location after receiving over 2,000 pledges of support from the local community. Its main downhill mountain biking centre is located on the outskirts of the LC location which attracts over 10,000 bikers to the area every year.

The centre was co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund²⁰ (ERDF) and the Communities First Initiative²¹, and has now evolved into one of the leading outdoor adventure tourism offerings in North Wales. The enterprise has moved from being totally grant dependent (2007) to being an incorporated company with local community members as directors and a turnover of approximately £500,000 in 2013/ 2014. It currently employs approximately 19 locals and any profit it makes is reinvested into other community projects in the LC location. In 2014, the social enterprise opened a café and a sports shop selling cycling and outdoor equipment in the centre of the LC location. As a result of this move, the social enterprise is now deemed a tourist information centre by many local tourism businesses as its aim is to develop the outdoor sector in the area for the benefit of the local economy. Therefore, the social enterprise will be referred to as the Local Tourist Organisation (LTO) from this point forward.

Over the last couple of years the location has become known as one of the best outdoor activity centres in the north of the country and is often referred to as a playground for adrenaline junkies in local and national press. The slate quarries have been taken over by private tourism companies and transformed into outdoor activity centres. These centres have featured on numerous national and international television programmes. Visitors can enjoy zip lining, mountain biking, caving, mountain climbing and even subterranean trampolining. During the summer months the outdoor activity centres record footfall of approximately 3,000 visitors a day but the local economy has not benefited greatly from this according to local tourism micro firm O/Ms. Other tourism activities the location offers include canoeing, fishing, historical walks and scenic train journeys.

The LC location is within driving distance to a number of international airports and ferry ports. In just over four hours visitors can travel to/ from London via train with just one switch over on route. The vast majority of tourism businesses operate within close proximity of each other (ranging from 100 metres to 2 kilometres) in the LC location. Over the past ten years the location has been served by numerous local voluntary tourism and

²⁰ European Commission scheme which aims to remove the economic and social imbalance between communities in the European Union.

²¹ Welsh government programme which focuses on helping communities in disadvantaged areas.

community development groups who have contributed to the development of tourism in the LC location. These groups include Group D whose activities were subsumed by the LC in 2014 when Group D members disbanded and approached the LC to take over two festivals that they had established and run for over 10 years in the LC location. The LC structure is detailed in table 6.7 below.

6.3.1 Evolution of tourism services

Throughout the last two decades the groups identified in exhibit 6.5 below have helped regenerate tourism in the LC location by securing funding for various tourism initiatives. The vast majority of group A and B members have retired, left the LC location or passed away and therefore they are not current members of the LC. Brenda is the only case participant who was a member of group B and is currently a member of sub group D (formally group C) and the LC.

For clarity, while group's A, B and C have been active in regeneration and development in the LC location over the past two decades, the only groups that are currently active include the LC (which primarily focuses on tourism) and sub group D. Sub group D's activities were subsumed by the LC in 2015. In order to provide a clear picture of LC2 and its historical context, the evolution of these groups (A, B, C and sub group D) is detailed in exhibit 6.5 below.

Exhibit 6.5: The Evolution of Voluntary Groups (2003-2016)

Over the years a number of voluntary groups have been very active in regeneration and development in the LC location. In 2003, group A was set up by local people to redevelop the local hall into a community venue. The historic building is where David Lloyd George²² made his first public speech and therefore it was anticipated by local tourism businesses that the hall could be a major tourism attraction in the area. After many years of consultations with local and national government agencies and potential funding agencies, the project came to a standstill in 2009 and was sold to a private investor. The buyer expressed his intention to push on with plans to redevelop the hall into a community venue but this had not begun by the time the researcher had completed the case study.

In 2006, the local council undertook a green town project after securing funding from the National Parks Sustainability Fund²³ and from Communities First, both government programmes. At this time the LC location had a number of complementary development initiatives taking place and in an effort to co-ordinate these, group C was formed. During interview Alan reflected on group C's achievements and explains;

[Group C] was very successful in securing funding for the [LC location] ... it had a few active members who were able to devote a lot of time to it ... both of them [have] now [passed away].

In 2008/ 2009, group B identified the need to improve how the location functions as a destination. The impetus for this collaboration was mainly due to concerns regarding the declining population in the area (approximately 2.5 per cent decline per annum) and the need to maximise the economic impact of existing tourism in the location. The project was developed and supported by local and national government in partnership with group C. In 2009, the location secured ERDF to regenerate the town centre. The funding and resultant collaborative activity has improved shop fronts and gateways to the town. It has improved the overall image of the town, a number of slate sculptures have been erected engraved with local poetry to reconnect the town with its industrial heritage. The project links in with the LTOs scheme (funded by Communities First and ERDF) to develop outdoor activities in the area as a key condition of the ERDF, which was to develop the area in an innovative and sustainable way. The regeneration project came to an end in 2013 and was recognised by The Royal Town Planning Institute²⁴ for planning excellence. At this time Group C disbanded.

Group C also existed in the LC location in 2006 and is a registered charity. In the past, group C has secured funding from the Big Lottery Fund²⁵ to provide events and activities for community development including the production of tourism brochures for the LC location. Currently, group C is responsible for organising two tourism events in the LC location including firework and bonfire night. Group C's main source of funding comes from fundraising at local events they organise and therefore the group does not directly rely on contributions from businesses. Over the past year (2014) this group has pretty

²² British Prime Minister between 1916 and 1922.

²³ Scheme set up by the Welsh government and administrated by the local National Park Authority. The aim of the scheme is to encourage innovative sustainable projects in communities.

²⁴ A charity that gives advice and supports dialogue between communities, industry representatives and public bodies during the planning process.

²⁵ National Lottery fund that provides grants to community groups and charitable projects across the United Kingdom.

much stalled as key individuals that previously drove the group have retired, passed away or left the area. As a result, group C activities were subsumed by the LC as Brenda explains;

It [group C] has been going for years and years and they were three ladies who were the main people in it ... but because their husbands died or have fallen ill they dropped out of the group ... there was nobody leading it [group C] so last year [2014] ... nothing had been organised for the fireworks or ... the Christmas lights night ... [One of the three ladies] came to me at the beginning of October [last year] and she said nothing has been organised for any of these two [events]. We had a meeting of the [LC] and we said we want this [bonfire and Christmas light night] to go [ahead] ... so we [LC] actually took over and we ran both events on behalf of [group C] only because there wasn't really anybody to take it forward ... now [2015] [Alan] seems to have taken up doing a lot of the organisation [for sub group D (formally group C) activities].

Alan, Brenda and Anna felt it would be advantageous for the LC to keep the charity designation of sub group D because they believed that the LC might be more successful if they applied for government/ council grants through sub group D in the future. They also believed that sub group Ds activities were in-line with the tourism remit of the LC.

Prior to 2011, the local Chamber was called the Chamber of Trade and it particularly focused on local business trade within the town. In 2011, Chamber members recognised that the town's manufacturing and engineering businesses had stalled and that tourism was becoming increasingly important to the local economy. Therefore the organisation changed its name to the Chamber of Commerce and Tourism, shifting the overriding emphasis from industry to tourism as the primary focus of its commercial efforts. The previous chair of the Chamber stated the catalyst for the name change in a local press publication;

It now makes sense, not just to look at commerce, but also at tourism. We [LC location] have a £4m regeneration about to start, coupled with the [LTO] project [to develop downhill biking trails], so we need to seize the opportunity and ensure we make [the LC location] a viable economy. This means attracting jobs, tourists and inward investment. One of the concerns is the lack of accommodation [in the LC location]. We need the whole range here to capitalise on a potential increase of over 20,000 visitors a year ... It's a great opportunity for someone to come in to the town (North Wales Daily Post, November 2011).

Since then, LC initiatives have been organised and negotiated at the Chamber of Commerce and Tourism meetings as this is where the local tourism stakeholders meet to discuss tourism activities in the LC location. Gavin (LTO - Board of Directors) confirms that;

The [Chamber of Commerce and Tourism] group facilitates meetings amongst local tourism stakeholders in the [LC location] [to discuss tourism initiatives].

6.3.2 Learning community: Introduction

The LC was formed in 2011 when the Chamber of Trade changed its name to the Chamber of Commerce and Tourism group in the LC location. This is where the micro firm O/Ms/ other rural tourism development stakeholders meet and engage in tourism development (as noted above). Although the Chamber has 70 plus members, for the purpose of this study LC membership comprises nineteen members (see table 6.2, p. 152) and includes micro firms and other tourism/ rural development stakeholders (representing various public and private organisations including representatives from the LTO), and these members specifically focus on tourism related activities in the LC location (as highlighted in table 6.7 below). The LC also incorporates group D's activities which were subsumed by the LC in 2014 and is now LC sub group D (see exhibit 6.5 above). Sub group D has a separate constitution to the LC as it has charitable status and therefore both groups cannot run together. Alan, Brenda and Anna are part of sub group D and they meet bi-monthly to decide sub group activities and report back 'surface work'²⁶ to LC members at meetings.

LC membership is voluntary and the overall aim of the group is to develop the LC location as a tourist destination. While membership is voluntary, the data suggests there are blurred criteria for LC membership with some members stating geographical boundaries as criteria while others believe any business can join the group regardless of their proximity to the LC's location. In addition, LC members are required to pay a small fee for membership each year.

The case LC participants are identified in table 6.2 (p. 152). For clarity, table 6.7 below provides a snapshot of the functions of the LC.

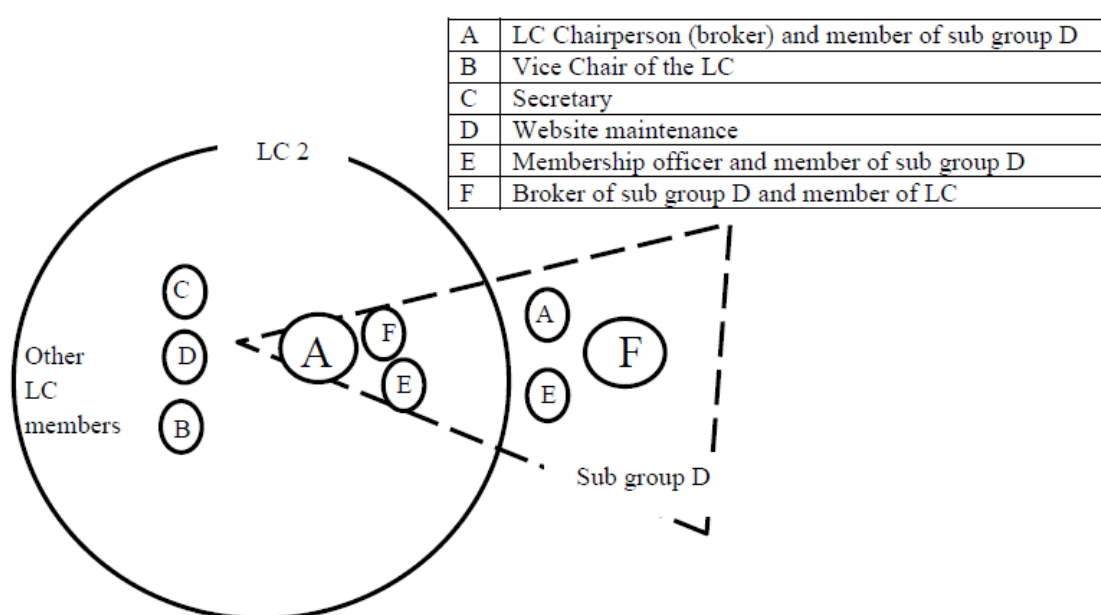
²⁶ Sub group D members making decisions and only sharing information with LC members when they require help with organising their activities.

Table 6.7: Defining Learning Community 2

LC membership criteria	LC Purpose	Resources provided by the LC
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tourism/ rural development stakeholders • Membership fee due each year • Operate business within a certain postcode area or nearby 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work together in the pursuit of tourism development • Promote networking amongst local tourism businesses/ stakeholders • Support sub group D in organising events in the LC location 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Website • Tourism leaflet • Facebook page • Meeting minutes

The LC structure is illustrated in figure 6.3.

Figure 6.3: Learning Community 2 Structure



As illustrated in figure 6.3 above the activities of sub group D are separate to the practice of the LC. The duplication of Brenda (A), Alan (F) and Anna's (E) roles illustrates that they are members of both the LC and sub group D. As depicted in figure 6.3, Brenda is central in the LC while Anna and Alan are active, while in sub group D Alan is central and Brenda and Anna are active. Sub group D is both part of the LC and also a separate

component. The external component of sub group D is not shared with the rest of the LC and it also provides a bridge out to funding opportunities in the external environment. Dona (C), Aidan (D) and Nicole (B) are active in the LC and although sub group D members rely on them for support with their activities they are not involved in its practice.

Larger tourism businesses who are members of the LC bring a lot of tourists to the area but they are not particularly interested in working closely with other LC members and they frequently don't attend LC meetings. Therefore, these members are labelled as peripheral (other LC members) in figure 6.3. In addition, although the LTO is represented at LC meetings (Gavin and/ or Jennifer) it is a separate entity. However, by their own admission they are trying to encourage collaboration amongst businesses in the LC and in pursuit of this they have adopted the regional councils 'buy local' initiative and offered it out to members of the LC. However, tensions exist between LC members and the LTO and this relationship is discussed further in section 6.3.6.1 below.

The LC meets approximately once every 4-6 weeks during the off peak tourism season (September – June). The vast majority of micro firms in the group have been in business in the LC location for the last three years or more. Communication flows are ineffective between members in the LC and between sub group D and LC members, as core LC members (Brenda, Aidan, Dona and Anna) are perceived by peripheral members as being very dominant in LC meetings as they often steer LC discussions in favour of their own business. Lauren, a B&B/ café owner, suggested that because the vast majority of central members operate business at one end of the main street in the LC location, LC events are always held close to their businesses. As a result she feels LC practice is being hindered because LC members with businesses at the other end of the high street (where Laurens businesses are situated) always lose out;

A lot of the people that are drivers behind the [LC] have businesses that end of the town [pointing down the high street], so this end is completely forgotten ... there is no signage to say this is what is going on down here ... I think there should be somebody independent of the [LC] businesses managing those big [LC] events so that everybody's business can benefit.

The researcher observed that numerous LC businesses are also members of various national tourism support organisations. Various LC members are also members of a number of different community/ local tourism groups in the LC location; '[Alan] *is on the chamber, he's on the town council ... and he is also looking after a lot of the [sub group D] stuff* (Brenda)'.

6.3.3 Catalyst for learning community formation

As referred to in section 6.3 above, the LTO in the LC location opened an outdoor biking activity centre in 2007. Following this, the LC location successfully secured European funding (£4.5 million) and commenced a major regeneration project in 2009 (see exhibit 6.5 above for further details). The regeneration project combined with the subsequent establishment of a number of large tourism activity businesses (including the LTOs biking centre) on the outskirts of the LC location has really motivated LC members to work together more than they had previously done;

One of the things that gave us more confidence to actually set up a small business here ... was the fact [that] they [funding source] spent £4.5 million on the town; central funding to improve the town (Daniel).

Dona concurs with Daniel's perspective above;

They [LC businesses] all want to build on anything new that is introduced to the town. They want to capitalise on [the establishment of the large tourism activity businesses in the LC location] so lots of things [extra tourists] have sort of run on [from that], I suppose opportunities.

Gavin believes the town will get busier and as a result of this he hopes collaboration amongst tourism businesses will strengthen further as members start to recognise the value of working together;

There is a massive opportunity now ... the uniqueness [of] the new zip lines and [other outdoor activities]. There is an opportunity to move forward now but we [LC] can't do it as one [provider]. We have to ... change the culture of business in the town, that there is strength in working together not being an individual provider.

Thus, the catalyst for collaboration in the LC emanated externally as a direct result of investment from European and Welsh governments and the subsequent establishment of a number of large tourism activity centres in the LC location (both private and publicly funded). This led to the formation of the LC in 2011 (as noted in section 6.3.2).

6.3.4 Structure and leadership

Throughout the case study the researcher observed that Brenda, owner of a large tourism business, held the position of chairperson and acted in a co-ordination and learning broker capacity in the LC. Brenda explains she has been a member of the LC for over ten years but she only became actively involved after she joined group C. To reiterate, group C secured European and Welsh government funding to improve the LC location. Brenda feels the major tourist business she manages was the main driving force behind her involvement in group C and her current leadership role in the LC;

I have been a member of the [LC] for must be 12 years ... I got involved in [the LC location] in the regeneration project ... because obviously the [local] railway [was] quite a big player in that ... the whole point of the regeneration programme was to try and get people into [the LC location] more and spread out more. We [local railway] take a significant number of people up there [LC location] every year over 100,000 [people] ... that was how I got more involved and then I became the chair of the [LC] nearly three years ago but that's probably because I think I have got more knowledge in tourism.

Brenda contributes immensely to LC activities and she has pushed the group along since she became chairperson three years ago. Without her enthusiasm the LC would struggle to function according to Dona;

[Brenda] the chair ... she puts so much energy into it [LC], it really does make a difference ... A chair that didn't have that same commitment I think things would be very different ... she has got lots of contacts and goes networking ... and so she represents the group in a number of different committees.

The above sentiment was echoed by numerous other LC members;

She [Brenda] has got quite a nice way about her and that sort of encourages people to come again ... the meetings wouldn't function very well [without her] (Una).

Without [Brenda] ... it [LC meetings] wouldn't be happening; it [LC] would fall apart (Lynn).

Brenda explained members can put themselves forward for a position on the LC committee when it becomes available. Alan notes;

We have elections but there is rarely more than one candidate ... we don't have ... people vying for places [on the LC committee].

However, Brenda feels LC members are time constrained and this means some positions are sometimes vacant;

It's anyone that will do it [part of the LC committee] really because again everybody is busy, so everybody wants to help but people don't really want the responsibility.

Other positions LC members held on the committee during the case study included vice chair (Nicole), secretary (Dona), website maintenance (Aidan) and membership officer (Anna). Alan explains that there is a core group of members who contribute a lot to the LC (as depicted in Figure 6.3 above) and the rest don't tend to get involved;

I think it is only fair that some of the other people [in the LC] pull their weight but again there is only about ten people who actually get in there and do the work which is a shame as opposed to everybody trying to help out.

Dona sends out meeting agendas, minutes and any other relevant information she receives from local/ national support organisations in between meetings to members via email. Individual LC members can also send information to Dona to distribute to the wider LC. The minutes are published on the group's website after each meeting. In addition, the LC utilises social media to promote events that are happening in the town;

It's the meeting minutes that get circulated to all members and we [LC] have the website ... members should be able to access the minutes on that I had a [poster] come through from the health board ... so I sent that [to Dona] and that has gone out to everyone [all LC members]. So we also send quite a lot of information about other things that are happening ... if anybody sends stuff to us we do circulate it. Facebook is very vibrant in [the LC location], everybody looks at the Facebook so if you put something on Facebook say[ing] there is an event this afternoon everybody will turn up its quite impressive (Brenda).

Sub group D focuses on planning and organising events in the LC location and its activities are reported back to LC members at meetings. As illustrated in figure 6.3 (p. 200) above, Alan now leads sub group D and receives help from Brenda and Anna in coordinating group activities. Currently there are no other LC members affiliated with sub group D but

they (sub group A) rely on the support of LC members for help in running their events.

Brenda outlines the reason why sub group D runs in parallel with the LC;

They [sub group D] are seen as a not-for-profit and one of the problems that we [LC] have [in] trying to get the grant[s] was that the council said ... you are business owners so you have all got lots of money ... whereas [sub group D] is seen [by the council] as a voluntary organisation so if they go and try get a grant it's easier for them ... than it is for the [LC] to get the grant ... I think in the future we [LC] will use [sub group D] just for getting the grants [and] they [LC and sub group D] have got their own constitution so you have got to run them side by side.

Dona reinforced Brenda's perspective above and the potential value of applying for future funding through sub group D as opposed to the LC;

The [LC] might be seen as insular and businesses trying to do stuff for themselves whereas that isn't what it is ... they [LC members] are trying to do it for the community because it will benefit the [community] and the businesses, and together it is a whole thriving thing ... other people's views of something like the [LC] is that it [could be] a self-interest group.

During interview Lauren (micro firm O/M) shared her feelings on the structure of the LC. Lauren recognises that the structure is evolving but in her opinion it is currently quite insular;

My personal opinion is that it [LC] is very local and probably not very efficient ... particularly for our business because we are a B&B [and] we can't always get to the meetings if we are waiting for guests to arrive ... it is still very non-tech, not much on the Internet. There aren't resources that are easily accessible by the Internet ... it's [LC] in a transition between everything being on paper and things being online.

Other non-core members felt LC meetings needed to be better organised before they would consider becoming more involved in group activities. Gareth commented on the structure of the last meeting;

Abysmally [organised] the last [meeting] ... to go off track ... people won't turn up to the next meeting. That meeting could have been done in about a third of the time. It is difficult you are dealing with volunteers ... but they [LC committee] just need to get their head together and be more succinct on things (Gareth).

Gareth's sentiment above was reinforced by Jennifer;

It [LC] definitely needs an objective and what they [LC committee] are trying to do and then a strategy on how they can achieve that rather than a piecemeal approach to things.

6.3.4 Participation and identity

Brenda, driven by her own experience as a large tourism business manager, became chair of the LC in 2012. Brenda explains the reason behind why she feels LC members elected her as chair;

I think I have got more knowledge in tourism. We [LC] saw it as a time when actually that was needed most ... somebody [involved] in tourism who would then look at how we could get those people [visitors] to spend money in the town because at the time the people coming to town didn't spend very much money.

Following her election as chair, Brenda believed it was important to emphasise to LC businesses how vital tourism was (and still is) to the local economy. Brenda explained that at that time she needed to encourage enthusiasm for tourism amongst LC members as a result. In an effort to achieve this and maintain wider LC engagement Brenda explains that she shared with the group;

Commerce is actually getting the money from ... tourism even if it's not direct ... it [tourism] [needs to be] discussed all the time ... tourism [is] bringing ... people into town ... even if your business isn't primarily a tourism business you score [indirectly].

Alan reinforced Brenda's comments and he explains that it has been difficult to convince LC businesses that the old industrial town has something to offer visitors;

[The LC location] was more [of a] manufacturing and engineering base. It has taken people a long while to realise that we haven't got any engineering/ manufacturing taking place [currently in the LC location], it's only tourism that is going to keep us [local businesses] going.

Dona recognises the seasonality of the tourism sector and she echoes the importance of tourism to the LC location;

[Tourism] is a big part of the locality ... things are very quiet and not much money moving around here in the winter time ... so we [LC businesses] have to capitalise on everybody [tourists] coming in [during the summer months].

The perception of the LC varied among members. In general, central members noted the value of attending and participating in LC activities in that it helps with building shared meaning with other LC businesses. Aidan explains;

I think we [LC] work fairly well [and it] is a fantastic group as far as I am concerned ... it's a good group that stick together trying to help each other and they [LC] have done a lot.

Dona noted during interview the value of participating in the LC to the development of her business in that it assists her in building relationships with other businesses in the LC location. Dona notes;

You get to meet everybody and find out what everybody does and you can tell them about what you do so once people know you they are more likely to refer people to you. I think its information and knowing individuals rather than just a name on a piece of paper; people don't feel connected to that.

Dona recognises that as collaborative relationships develop amongst tourism providers the local community will benefit also and this encourages her continued participation in the group;

It is working for the greater good because the better the community is the more people [tourists] would want to be here and come back again.

The exchange of information and achievement of results (reducing car park charges) is what encourages some members to become involved at a deeper level in the LC according to Alan;

We talk about different problems [and] successes in the area [at LC meetings] ... when people see results they will be attending and giving their suggestions and ideas.

Alan's comment above was reinforced by Brenda. Brenda draws on a past example that was raised by Una at a previous LC meeting;

People can put forward things ... for instance [Una] ... said that we [LC location] ought to have a short stay car park because people were coming into her and they were complaining that they had to pay £3 to park and so we [LC] worked on that and we [LC] managed to change the parking so that came directly from [Una].

However, new members of the LC such as Lauren believes that there is little opportunity for them to contribute to discussions as the LC is dominated by core members;

It [LC] needs to be slightly more independent because the vested interest of certain people who have senior roles manipulates some of the potential for change to happen ... I would say closed questions, closed answers, lack of opportunity for people to contribute and their opinions to be considered before decisions are made.

This was reinforced by Gareth who has been part of the LC for a number of years and is also a peripheral member like Lauren. He explains that some committee members with identified roles communicate and organise group activities amongst themselves without consulting the wider group. This impedes the sustainability of the LC in the longer term;

You are just not in the loop ... It's down to communication ... two people [Brenda and Nicole] at the [LC] meeting said they were [at the local mountain biking event] talking about the [LC location] ... and giving out leaflets ... I didn't know they were doing that, if they said that I might have been able to find a few hours and go up there and help them (Gareth).

Other peripheral members decided to refrain completely from attending LC meetings because they felt they needed to focus their time on 'making a living'. Notably, Daniel (a peripheral member) explains during interview that he has suggested different ideas to central members in the LC in the past but they had 'fallen on deaf ears';

I have suggested that we do a super car day and I have got contacts. Get these people to pop in [to the LC location] and if you get twenty cars or so that's enough it only takes up a small amount of the car park but it's a draw [to the LC location]. I think the [LC] gets big ideas instead of thinking if we get six small [events] we can handle that because there are [LC] members on very committee [in the LC location] ... I am out of touch with the [LC] but for a good reason, I have to carry on making a living (Daniel).

This has resulted in some LC members reflecting on how the structure of LC meetings can be improved to ensure members do not feel intimidated about sharing their ideas with other members. For example, during interview Una suggests;

Possibly, the only thing is breaking up into smaller groups and talking about ideas. I would say that might help because then you would voice things and at least it could be picked up whereas often you don't really want to tout your stuff. If there is a few of you who agree in a small group then it could go to the bigger group ... because you will always think maybe that's [idea] not quite so good and often [one person] might get shouted down [by the LC].

However, Una had not shared this idea with other members of the LC as of yet. Lauren believes that if logistics were improved she would contribute more to the practice of the LC;

I would like to be more involved [in the LC] [but only] if [they] can get into a system whereby the meetings are properly managed and planned so that from one meeting to the next you know when that meeting is rather than somebody sending an email saying there is going to be a meeting next week.

In addition, Lauren explains that peripheral members would engage more in LC practice if they had a voice when decisions are being made by central members in LC meetings;

[The LC needs to be] *much more open to suggestion, open to ideas, open to how people [non-core members] can take some responsibility for things ... [central members] [need to] let go of some of that control so that more people ... would attend the meetings if they felt that what they had to say was valued and put in the mix and not dismissed [by central members] as ... that's not what happens.*

Gareth echoes Laurens observation above; '*anyone can raise their ideas [at LC meetings] but whether they [central members] take any notice or not is very questionable*'.

6.3.4.1 Awareness of responsibility/ contribution

Brenda notes her current role in the LC is very time consuming as it entails a number of different responsibilities such as representing and promoting the LC in external events and meetings among others. She is well aware of the capabilities of group members and what level of contribution they can make to the LC. Brenda hopes that the appointment of the new vice chair (Nicole) would allow her to pass some of her current responsibilities to Nicole;

I would like to step back and let somebody else have a go at being the chair [of the LC] ... I find it is quite time consuming and I feel frustrated that I would like to give it more time but I have got a very full-time job ... I am also on the North Wales tourism board so I struggle to try and fit everything in with my home life as well ... but having [Nicole] who has just joined us as a deputy chair might actually be enough to ... spread the load a little bit.

Brenda leverages internal expertise when preparing funding applications on behalf of the group. Brenda now feels that Nicole's past experience with securing grants for communities will improve the LC's chances of being successful. In addition to leveraging internal expertise Brenda reflects on previous funding applications in an effort to avoid previous mistakes;

I have been talking with [Nicole] who's got quite a bit of experience with funding applications ... she's got some ideas on perhaps where we might get funding ... it was clear from that one [previous funding application] that actually we were kind of trying to get the wrong sort of grant and although it was a nice idea to get somebody, I think the way we had to twist it, to try and work it out into a community thing it just didn't work.

The researcher observed at the meeting that Nicole has already started to help Brenda with her boundary spanning role;

[Nicole] and I had a very interesting day at the [local mountain biking event]. We went and spent the day up at [the site] talking to some of the bikers ... we gave out lots of leaflets and talked to anyone that we could and asked have you thought about going down into town.

Some committee members have decided to abstain from getting involved in the wider practice of the LC and only volunteer to work on certain aspects of LC practice. Aidan believes he contributes a lot to LC activities;

I sort of leave the rest of it ... I put a lot of time into the website doing the amendments and changes to it ... so I think it is only fair that some of the other people pull their weight.

Alan explains that a certain degree of non-participation in the LC is accepted by other members;

People drop in and out or become more or less prominent [in the LC] as their personal circumstances change ... if you don't turn up for a couple of months you just miss out on what [has been] going on.

Dona is well aware of her role in the LC and she notes that she can easily fit LC activities in with her everyday workload;

As secretary I am just making sure that the constitution is adhered to and I take the minutes and ensure that they are circulated ... I maintain the email list because people seem to change their emails or they change their server ... I just make sure that information gets around to people ... I have to do paper work anyway so the things [LC duties] link together while I am at the computer doing one thing I can be doing the other as well.

Dona explains that she has introduced action points into the minutes to ensure members are aware of their responsibility in the LC;

I have introduced action points for example, action by different people so that they [LC members] don't say something at the meeting and then it sort of disappears ... there is a constant reminder there for them ... and we are going to need an answer by a particular date.

The impact of this action on the group is that it assists with structuring LC meetings in that they become more focused. Dona's contribution to the LC does not go unnoticed by other members. Gavin comments;

I think the lady [Dona] she started to take the meeting minutes ... I think she has been ... pulling things together.

Similarly, Brenda commented that Anna is very proactive when it comes to signing up new LC members. Anna connects and establishes a relationship with new businesses that have just moved into the LC location;

When she [Anna] finds there are new people in the town ... she goes around and talks to them and tries to enrol them [in the LC] so she is quite good at talking to people (Brenda).

Aidan who maintains the LC website noted that other LC members (outside of the committee) seem to think that you are sort of there at their 'beck and call';

I am a member of that [LC] committee and I look after the website so I am classed as the marketing officer for the [LC] but I have got lots of other things to do like running the guesthouse and lots of outdoor activities. I just see myself as more of a website coordinator ... as opposed to a marketing officer for the town.

Aidan acknowledges the importance of the website for attracting tourists to the LC location, but explains he is close to retirement and someone new is needed to bring fresh ideas to the website;

I just hope we [LC] can get another person because ... I am getting close to retirement ... at the end of the day now if you are going to sell yourself you have got to do it on the internet so the website is the place and it has got the potential. Maybe it needs somebody who has got a better vision than I have. [My wife] would say she doesn't know why I am the marketing officer for [the LC location] because I do find the place a little bit grey especially when it is raining.

The researcher observed that some members did not have the required skills to become involved at a deeper level in the LC. This was evident when Aidan asked Alan to put the bonfire night poster on Facebook; *'I am not very technological ... it doesn't register with me (Alan)'*.

Lauren who joined the LC recently has only been to one meeting and she noted that she does not have any responsibility in the LC. She did offer assistance with group activities but she has not been asked to help as of yet. Lauren feels as the LC stands; *‘people often resist change for no other reason other than this is the way it has always been done’*. Lauren believes that she has not been part of the group for long enough to take up a role in the LC;

I just think we haven't been here long enough to actually take on any of these roles [in the LC] because me personally, I don't know enough people ... I don't have responsibility in the [LC] but I did say if they [LC members] needed any things in particular that they needed doing, if they let me know and [if] I could help them then I would, but I haven't been contacted by those people.

Others concurred noting the only responsibility they have in the group was to turn up at meetings. Brenda acknowledges that as the town gets busier LC members will want to work together and contribute more to LC initiatives. However, Brenda accepts that some businesses will only join the LC to be a member in name;

There are a lot of people who just pay so they are just on the list and ... on the website ... some people can't get involved in meetings because they are working in the evening or living away from the locality.

Gavin believes members are unaware of other member's roles in the LC and as a consequence LC activities are being hindered. He reflects on a past event that took place in the town;

We [LTO] talked to the [LC] about it [running event] maybe a year before [the event] but they [LC] didn't seem to be a concerted sort of effort to market it probably ... the same people doing the same things and they're disjointed ... again a missed opportunity.

Gavin's perspective above was echoed by newcomers to the LC. Lauren feels the group is very disjointed and that she finds it difficult to pin point what roles other members carry out in the LC;

Some things do [get done] ... but again it's a little bit difficult to say because I certainly don't feel familiar with the system as it is ... who's responsible for what, who do you tell or who do you link together with things ... things seem to be operating in satellite function without it really coordinating, so if we ... became aware of something that we wanted to let others know [about], I am not sure how we would do that and who we would speak to.

As a consequence, during interview Gavin suggested that sub group D should merge with the LC because he felt the majority of people who are core members in the LC also lead sub group D. Gavin suggests that if this did happen, it could potentially lead to a stronger united voice from LC members and more could be achieved in the LC location as a result;

You have got all of these splinter groups in [the LC location] such as [sub group D] and [the LC] ... they all kind of do the same thing in my opinion instead of just having one group with a clear focus ... I think you would get proper stuff done if they [sub group D and the LC] came together.

6.3.4.2 Learning community membership and boundary

Brenda feels the LC is losing out as a result of its location and the inherent impact on not being able to join local tourism groups in the neighbouring council's district;

If I could move [the LC location] into [the neighbouring councils district] then I would because I think they are much better at tourism ... they certainly have got very affluent places that are much better off and much bigger tourism places so I suppose they see tourism as being very much important.

Una explains that in the past she has tried to link with the tourism association in a neighbouring town but she was told that she couldn't because she does not operate business in the catchment area;

I tried to join [the tourism association in a neighbouring village] because they always have things going on ... classic car shows and everything so I said I will learn what they are doing and how they do it and also link into their businesses because they might send people to us [LC location] if I did but they [tourism association] said you are not in [this councils district] so ... you are not allowed to join and I thought that was really not good at all. It was a good email but the [tourism association] committee didn't want it.

However, it seems that the final say in such decisions lies with the organisation which individuals are asking to join, as Brenda explains, Seren (who owns a small hotel in a neighbouring village) was allowed to join the LC because her business added value to the LC location;

We [LC] don't have a very set boundary ... for us [LC location]; she [Seren] provides a nice hotel with food in the evening which we don't have in [the LC location]. The hotel here in [the LC location] is struggling again a little bit, they do have accommodation and food but that's the only hotel ... I think she [Seren] doesn't take business away I think she adds to what we have got ... We have got loads of really nice B&Bs and guesthouses ... but somewhere you can stay and get an evening meal we are very short of.

Dona reinforced Brenda's perspective noting that;

There is no rule stopping businesses from outside the area from joining. We [LC] allow anyone join that will add value. It's people doing it for themselves and forgetting boundaries.

During interview Seren confirmed that the LC bent their rules to allow her join the group; 'The [LC] said we are going to bend our rules so you can be in our [group]'. The data also suggests that various criteria guides LC membership. Some LC members noted geographical criteria while others believed that any business can join the group. Aidan explains that businesses have to be within a certain distance to the town centre to be allowed join the group;

We [LC] have drawn a line ... [neighbouring village] is as far as we go ... and we have got a similar thing at the other end of the town, so probably if you look at it a 4/5 mile radius of people who can join but we are not certainly going to take people ... from [a popular tourism destination 11 miles away] who are then going to take away the business.

In contrast to Aidan and Brenda's comments above, Alan believes all businesses are welcome to join the LC regardless of their location;

We [LC] are happy to take anybody, people in [the neighbouring village] are welcome to join [the LC] because we [would] like to know what they [businesses in neighbouring village] are doing and presumably they would like to know what we [LC businesses] are doing.

Similar to Alan, other LC members felt that the group was open to all business O/Ms and that this was important. Lauren argues; 'It [LC location] is so isolated that you need that cross-community really'. With regard to the membership fee, Brenda and many other members of the LC noted that the fee is minimal. Membership money is used to help fund LC resources such as the website and tourism brochure among others. Brenda feels that this is important to promote broader engagement;

We [LC] try to keep it [membership] as cheap as possible ... so more people can be involved ... charging the smaller amount, people can afford to be in it [the LC] so we try and keep it inclusive ... We [LC committee] would rather they were more members than it was expensive and we were making more money.

However, Gareth notes that some businesses have dropped out of the group because they don't see a visible return on their membership fee to the LC. Gareth explains;

It's time/ money versus sense of community ... There is a [tourism related business] in town ... and I asked him [owner] why aren't you a member of the [LC] and he [said] I can't afford it because I won't get a return on it [membership fee] ... he reckoned the fees were too great.

Gareth's business is situated just outside the LC location and as a consequence he may never fully engage in the LC. However, Gareth still feels a sense of duty to participate;

If I dropped out of it would it make any difference to my business ... the answer is no ... I regard it as an obligation because although we are out of town so most of the stuff doesn't apply to us including the town regeneration ... none of that came our way. I am part of the area and I have a lot to offer ... I am a qualified mountain leader ... and the only tourism provider that is providing the green side ... we have got 6 bedrooms which puts us as one of the biggest guesthouses in the area.

The LC has a website. Paid up members are listed on the group's website but if they want a full page advert on the site they have to pay an extra fee. The data suggests that payment of this additional fee by members does not guarantee deeper participation in the LC;

They [Seren's business] have paid there £80 for a full advert. I have actually phoned [Seren] and sent her my email address and I can't do anymore ... she [has] to produce whatever she want[s] ... on the website ... as I would be helpless to produce a page for her but as I said I am not prepared to do anymore now (Aidan).

6.3.5 Evolution of learning community practice

At LC meetings, members begin by reviewing the minutes from the previous meeting. At the meeting the researcher was present at in September 2015, the researcher observed that members are given time to reflect on the previous minutes and voice their opinions before they are passed by the chair. Once the previous minutes are passed the meeting agenda which all members have received in advance is followed. All items of business on the agenda are then discussed by LC members. During meetings members can put forward concerns about the LC location that they feel are impacting negatively on their own business and/ or LC tourism initiatives;

There is a good exchange of information that you always get from [attending LC meetings] and you can ask any questions about anything in the town which is good (Una).

During the meeting the researcher observed Nicole was elected as vice chair by members. It was hoped that the creation of this new position would help ease the workload of the core members in the LC and that Nicole's knowledge and experience would really help with LC initiatives. Brenda acknowledges that she lacks the expertise in certain areas and therefore the appointment of Nicole as vice chair will help fill these skill gaps in the LC;

[Nicole] the lady who is the deputy chair, she was only elected this week at the meeting. ... she has got a lot of experience ... in getting funding and things like that which I don't have ... she has got a little bit more time [which is] good for us [LC] because those of us who are on the [LC] committee already are very busy.

Nicole shared some ideas with the LC on possible grants the group could apply for. During interviews a number of LC members (both central and peripheral) reflected on Brenda's and Nicole's comments at the meeting and agreed that the group needed someone in a full-time coordination role who could dedicate a lot more hours to LC initiatives. Although Dona acknowledged that some members of the LC have vast experience in completing funding applications, Aidan notes that the LC has applied for a grant to fund the position in the past but the application was unsuccessful;

What the place could do with and I don't think they will get funding for it ... [is] a full time marketing officer and that's what it [LC] really needs. They have been trying now for a while [to secure funding for the role].

Following this, the researcher observed that meeting discussions shifted to focus on sub group D activities. Alan along with Brenda reported to the LC on sub group D developments. The vast majority of LC members are not part of the practice of sub group D and therefore they do not fully understand the structure or practice of the group. However, evidence suggests sub group D members depend on the support of LC members to ensure the smooth running of events. Una notes; '*if the [LC] didn't spearhead things [sub group D events] ... some of the events wouldn't go ahead*'. Findings suggest that LC members outside the core find it difficult to differentiate between the LC and sub group D and why they need to be separate groups. Details of this interplay between the LC and sub group D's practice is outlined in exhibit 6.6 below.

Exhibit 6.6: Deliberating Sub Group D Activities

Brenda started the discussion on the upcoming bonfire and firework night in the LC location and after several minutes discussing logistical plans for the event, the discussion turned to focus on how the event was going to be funded and if a potential profit was going to be made. Alan noted;

I have looked at fireworks and we can get a distant display lasting 15-20 minutes for about £1000-1200 and I can probably get 15% discount off of that still which is including VAT [value added tax] which we can't claim back because [sub group D] is not VAT registered. We [sub group D] need to make sure we make all of that money back.

Brenda then suggested that an entrance fee could be charged. Alan agreed and suggested a number of other ways the event could yield a profit;

This year we [sub group D] need to organise our own food stalls, our own entertainments and other stalls to draw people in and to perhaps charge an entrance or/ and make sure we go around shaking the bucket as well.

Alan suggested the group could apply for a licence to sell alcohol on the night. However, Brenda reflected on a previous event which was held in the LC location which had a mobile bar and after her input, Alan decided not to apply for a licence. Alan reinforced that LC members were needed to run stalls and steward the event on the night;

We [sub group D] have got to get enough people together that ... are going to be there [at the event] ... on the night to run the stalls ... we do need more [stewards] especially if we decide to charge an entrance fee.

Brenda stated sub group D needed to hold a meeting before the fireworks night to finalise preparation. Alan called out to LC members again that help was needed even if it was just a financial contribution towards sub group D;

Wouldn't it be nice if people could be involved in firework night even if they just stood there and made a reasonable contribution to [sub group D]. We [LC members] all want stuff there that will draw people in but we need to make sure we make money so we can fund the Christmas lights [event].

The researcher observed that LC members did not offer any assistance to sub group D members during the meeting despite a direct request from Alan a week beforehand;

Just a quick update on the [firework] display. Everything is going to plan so far (fingers crossed) and volunteers are now needed on Wednesday morning to help erect marquees and prepare the site. Stewards are needed on the night to ensure safety and financial success. Please let me know if you can help (Email communication to LC members).

(Meeting observations and LC email communication)

Some LC members see sub group D as a closed group. This was evident when Alan asked LC members for help with coordinating the upcoming bonfire night (as noted in exhibit 6.6

above). During interview Lynn reflected on Alan's request at the LC meeting. Lynn explains why she did not offer any assistance with the upcoming tourism events;

We have never really been involved in it [sub group D] ... so maybe it is judging, but [they] won't accept any ideas off any new people.

During interview Gareth added '*they [sub group D] operate their own thing*' and that is why he has refrained from helping with its activities. Other LC members felt no sense of connection with sub group D and questioned whether the group had a purpose; '*if [sub group D] is not actually doing anything well then just forget it*' (Aidan).

6.3.5.1 Learning community collaboration

Gavin and Jennifer referred to the big players in the tourism sector in the LC location and noted that until they started to attend LC meetings the capability of the group to achieve any real outcomes is undermined. Gavin explains that in the absence of a vision, collaboration amongst LC members will not improve;

There are little things being done but they could be so much more ... the key players don't really attend [LC meetings]. When I say the key players it is those who are bringing people into the town like [the large outdoor tourism activity businesses] ... so [the LC] is not working in partnership ... There needs to be more [LC] engagement.

To reiterate, the vast majority of larger tourism businesses are peripheral members in the LC (as illustrated in figure 6.3 above) and therefore they do receive the meeting minutes from Dona. Gavin suggests that the other larger tourism stakeholders do not feel a sense of community. He notes one example of an initiative that he proposed to illustrate this;

Maybe it was me being naïve ... [I] ask[ed] [the other larger tourism providers in the LC] ... for every pound or 50p they get from a [entry] ticket [would] they put it into a pot to support working together on tourism projects ... but there is not that [level of] collaboration [amongst the larger and smaller tourism businesses in the LC].

Findings highlight that some of the smaller LC businesses have also tried to work with the larger LC businesses in the past for example during interview Una reflected on Daniel's experience of dealing with the larger tourism businesses in the LC location; '*I know [Daniel] took his [business] sign up [to the larger tourism activity business] and it never*

really materialised at all and it [sign] wasn't put on display'. Una believes shared meaning has not been established amongst the large tourism providers and the smaller tourism businesses in the group and therefore Una explains that the ability of the LC to achieve a collaborative learning ethos is hindered;

There isn't that close relationship between us and [the larger tourism activity providers] ... they think the town is a little bit against them because I know the town doesn't like it [when] they ... take the coaches straight up [to their site].

Gareth explains that the attitude of some LC members towards the larger businesses is that; *'They are not welcome in [the LC location] because they are not [local] people'*. However, Gareth believes that the latter reason is not the only one to explain why some LC members display this attitude;

There is a lot of politics in there [relationship between large and small tourism businesses] ... they [large tourism activity business] ha[d] the BBC²⁷ d[o] a film thing up in the quarry ... for about 4 days but I don't think the people [several LC business O/Ms] who own the access road ... think they got their fair cut of it ... that's where a lot of the niggles crept in.

However, Brenda (who manages a large tourism organisation) explained that although the larger tourism businesses do not actively get involved in the LC, they are still promoting the LC location and the micro firms that operate business within the town at external events. Brenda explains;

We [larger tourism business] go out and do a lot of marketing ... we have been to the flower show for two days with our locomotive [train] and we ... are promoting [the LC location] as well because we are part of the [LC] ... We have been to London and we always take the [tourism] leaflets with us ... whenever any of the bigger organisations [in the LC location] go [to external events] they are promoting [the LC location], they are taking the [tourism] leaflets so they are helping some of the smaller [businesses within the LC] who couldn't afford to go to those places.

In an attempt to strengthen the relationship between the small and larger tourism LC businesses, Brenda invited the owner of a large tourism activity business to come and speak to the LC about their company and discuss potential business opportunities with LC members. After this talk it was evident that relationships started to build between these members;

²⁷ BBC: British Broadcasting Corporation, National Television Agency, U.K.

[The large tourism activity business] *is keen to work with accommodation providers in the area and members agreed that this move could be very good for the town* (Meeting minutes).

Other aspects influencing collaborative practice within the LC were noted by Seren (micro firm O/M), Una and Lauren. Seren explains that she finds it difficult to work and compete with other accommodation providers in the LC location and that a lot of the time it is really down to the personality of the other LC members and whether they are willing to engage in coopetition;

You don't want to pass your business to somebody who's going to then steal your business and it's a delicate balance ... sometimes we don't work with the [other LC] businesses ... we stand back if we are full ... we try and make them [guests] come at a different time ... [we] don't really want to send them to [our] competitors.

During interview Una reflected on an LC initiative she proposed and organised last year in the LC location. Una notes that she would not do it again because of the lack of support she received from other LC members;

I tried to do a Santa walk last year but I can't think of any of the [LC members] who turned up to support it. It was raining but ... I put so much effort into it, I probably wouldn't want to do it again.

Lauren reflected on other regions she previously operated business in and noted that the legacy of businesses not working together in Wales may actually impede collaboration amongst LC businesses in the longer term. Lauren explains;

I would say really just having come from near London to here, one of the things I think is needed greater in Wales generally is much better coordination of what is on and where, and what there is to do ... you have got lots of people who are trying to promote small businesses on their own and it is all in isolation.

The impact of not being fluent in the national language of Wales²⁸ was also hindering LC collaboration and engagement according to Brenda;

I think one of the issues we [LC] do have is, I have to run the meeting through the medium of English because although I am a Welsh learner my Welsh isn't good enough to run a meeting and there has been a few people who I noticed don't come anymore as

²⁸ The 2011 U.K. census found that approximately 562,000 people (aged 3 and over) in Wales are Welsh speakers. The census further highlighted that the LC region had the highest percentage (56 per cent) of fluent Welsh speakers in Wales.

they felt the meeting should be run in Welsh ... That is a little bit of a problem and the chair before me was a Welsh speaker.

Throughout the case study numerous learning symbols were highlighted in the LC. These included the LC website, Facebook page, meeting minutes and tourism brochure. The researcher observed there was clear value in negotiating such resources at community level and this is detailed next.

6.3.5.2 Negotiating learning community symbols

Core members are becoming increasingly aware of the need to market the LC location online. This was reinforced in the meeting minutes which detailed the amount of visitors the LC Facebook page (which is linked to the LC website) received in the past month;

It was noted that the Chamber's Facebook page had 8,784 visits in August 2015 and members were asked to keep submitting their events for addition to the Facebook page which was becoming a useful resource for the local community.

However, during interview Gareth commented on the effectiveness of using social media as a communication strategy as numerous LC members do not use Facebook. In addition, he notes that some members of the LC have only received wifi signal recently;

Facebook is another problem in that it is alright saying it's all on Facebook but we don't use Facebook a lot. I certainly don't know the intricacies of it. [Alan's] place has just now got wifi but he has been fighting it for years. You can't just say it's on Facebook (Gareth).

The researcher observed that Aidan made it clear to other LC members that if they wanted their advert on the LC website updated they needed to contact him directly. The researcher noted that the vast majority of members present at the meeting nodded their heads (agreed) to Aidan's request;

You [other LC members] need to provide the information [for your advert on the website] because I am not going to go around for information ... that's what I am having to do at the moment and whoever takes over from me at the AGM will probably feel the same way about it. I am not going to chase after people (Meeting observation).

Previous to the above request by Aidan it seemed that less central members did not see a tangible benefit from contributing to the LC website even though they are listed on it; ‘*I don’t think we have ever had a booking in six years from it [the LC website]*’ (Gareth). This lack of engagement with the website frustrated core members because they feel that it reflects badly on the LC as a whole;

If someone’s website is out of date or their particular [part] of [the] website is out of date it makes the rest of us look like idiots. It devalues the [LC] website (Alan).

During interview a number of LC members started to reflect on the discussion that occurred on the website at the last meeting (September 2015). Alan recognises that he lacks the skills to contribute to the website but he understands the value of the website in contributing to LC practice;

It [LC website] is pretty good. We [LC] have got to have one nowadays ... I am not a electronics person but I am realising how much we do need it as we were talking last night [at the LC meeting] about wifi in the café, car [park] payments and everybody needs a website now because that’s what people [tourists] look at and we [LC businesses] get an awful lot of trade from trip advisor ... that illustrates how we should be going forward and there has been lots of plans for these history points and QR [quick response] codes around the town so people know what they are looking at and if anything to improve the visitor experience.

Other LC members had started to contemplate how the website could be improved;

It’s [list of LC businesses] alphabetically put ... if your [businesses name begins with] A you do quite well and if you are Z you don’t because people don’t scroll through [lists] looking for the name of something, so different ways of being able to pull up information would be quite useful (Dona).

Lauren also reflected on the LC’s website and she noted that it does not meet the needs of her business. As a consequence, Lauren promotes her business on her own social media and other travel website pages. Lauren suggests a number of potential improvements to the website during interview but she has not shared these ideas with other LC members as of yet;

We have our own Facebook page for guests of the B&B and for the coffee shop and we are also on trip advisor so we use that mostly for promoting ourselves ... as far as I am aware my understanding is that the actual [LC] web page could be better managed as a platform to: (A) link with events coming not only to the town but the surrounding area ... [because] guests say ... they find it very difficult to find what’s going on in the ... local area ... [and] (B) There is a lot of things that are not online so for example to even

find the bus time table ... is pretty difficult ... it's [LC website] not very instant is what I would say.

Lauren explains the reason why she has not contributed to the development of the LC website or shared her ideas as to how the website can be improved with other LC members;

I think for us we have not been here [in the LC location] long enough to make those suggestions without them sounding ... quite arrogant.

Dylan noted that some businesses email addresses on the website are out of date. Aidan responded to Dylan's comment at the LC meeting by encouraging all members to report such errors to him so they can be fixed;

That's a problem we [LC] are having that people are finding things that are out of date ... why don't they [LC members] come and tell me. I am not going to sit there and keep reading [over the website] every couple of days to see if there's something not up to date. If somebody finds something out of date for goodness sake just send me an email saying that there needs changing and I will get it changed because there is nothing worse than a website being out of date ... [Dona] can you please put that in [the meeting minutes] so all members will be aware (Meeting observation).

The researcher observed that Aidan further encouraged other LC members to contribute to the website by reading aloud two reviews he had received on the website from individuals external to the LC;

I have had a couple of emails in the past couple of months saying how good the website is. There was a guy that worked here [in the LC location] for a couple of years and I have got it here [the email] ... I like the [LC] website very much, very clean design and set out well, and I have had another one that was fairly similar ... so there [are] people that think it's good but saying that it does need a refresh.

However, Gavin believes the ability of the LC website to promote the LC location is hindered because it is not linked to the websites of the larger outdoor tourism activity businesses in the LC location;

It [LC website] is not directly linked to the main attractions that are getting all the nationwide ... and I don't think there is a big enough presence of the town on what they are doing. I mean they [large tourism activity businesses] are getting millions and millions of hits from people across the world but is there a direct link with the [LC website] and what's going on in the town; I don't think so, I have yet to see it.

With regard to the current tourism brochure, Brenda and Alan took the lead in producing it for the LC location. Alan outlines the development of the brochure and how he believes it has contributed to the strengthening of relationships amongst LC members;

We [LC] had an existing leaflet and we had a very small amount of money left in our budget and [Glenda (county council)] donated £500 and the town council donated £500 and I got ... everybody to pay for their entry [advert fee] and we got enough together to that [new tourism leaflet] going which is an upgrade on the previous one. [A] local photographer did the photographs for free and donated them ... it was a proper community effort and it [new tourism leaflet] has been very successful. We were well oversubscribed for it and the next one we do ... will be much bigger because there [were] a lot more people willing to advertise in it which cost £30 an advert.

As a result of the considerable interest from LC members to advertise in the tourism brochure Alan explains how LC businesses were selected;

What we [Brenda and Alan] did was ... we asked everyone who was on [the previous tourism brochure] if they wanted to carry on their advert and then any spaces that were left over, we gave them to [other LC businesses on a] first come first served basis.

This was reinforced by Dona as she notes that; *'It was first come first served with regard to who was chosen to get their advert in [the tourism brochure] and I think people were happy with that'*. The researcher noted that all LC members had an equal opportunity to contribute to the design of the brochure and financially to its development. Brenda explains that they wanted to keep advertising space on the brochure cheap so that it was inclusive. During interview Daniel commended Brenda and Alan on their hard work;

Limiting people to the number and keeping everybody having the exactly same size advert which meant that there were more contributors because it was cheaper. You could reach the smaller person rather than it being swallowed up by the larger organisations, that was discussed and that was a good idea. Apparently what happened in the past was ... those [businesses] that have done well ... would have the finances and resources and take up three quarters of a page or a whole page ... Now it reaches more ... and I think under the circumstances [Brenda and Alan did] a very good job.

Although Gareth pointed out that the maps are effectively the same on the front and back of the brochure; the researcher observed that the vast majority of LC members displayed the tourism brochure in their shops. There was a general consensus amongst members on how popular the current brochure was with tourists as highlighted in the meeting minutes;

[LC location] TOURIST LEAFLET (Item 12): [Brenda] reported that the new leaflet which was released around Easter 2015 [and] had been well received [by all LC

members]. [Brenda] suggested that the next leaflet should be bigger in order to allow for more advertisers to participate [in the leaflet].

The negotiation of funding applications and opportunities at LC meetings also stimulated shared meaning and a sense of mutual understanding amongst members. Brenda noted at the meeting;

I mean it is having this person to go around and keep everything moving especially in the summer ... everything has just stopped now and nobody has any time to do anything whereas if you had that person you could do this any day of the week ... I don't know how we [LC] could get anything from LEADER²⁹ (Meeting observation).

During interview Alan reflected on the funding application discussion that took place at the previous meeting and he drew on a previous LC event as an example of how extra resources such as a coordinating/ marketing officer could benefit LC practice. Alan explains;

We [LC] were pushing to make sure that it [LC event] wasn't just captured by one person ... that we could run it in a way ... so that everyone in town would benefit and everyone would know about it because one of our problems is that these things happen and if they are not sufficiently advertised nobody knows.

Peripheral members recognised that core members in the LC are also time constrained and therefore Lauren reinforced Aidan's comments above;

I think they [LC committee] are doing the best they can but ... because ... it's various people that are running small businesses and they don't have a lot of time ... that means that you are not always very efficient. You almost need somebody who has a full-time role coordinating all the things [LC initiatives].

As a consequence of the resource constraints LC members' face, the vast majority of members engage with external individuals and local/ national tourism support groups including Visit Wales, Federation of Small Businesses and LEAD Wales³⁰ to further aid LC practice and learning.

²⁹ A rural development programme set up by the European Union.

³⁰ LEAD Wales provides leadership development programmes to small and medium sized enterprises who operate in rural locations and is funded by the European Social Fund, the Welsh Government, Swansea and Bangor Universities

6.3.6 External relationships

Brenda is very proactive in the LC according to Dona as she encourages LC members to establish external relationships with other local tourism/ community groups in the LC location. As an example, Dona reflected on an event that was being driven by the town council in the LC location. Dona explains;

The town council were leading on the [town twinning event] ... and the [LC] ... picked up on it ... through [Brenda] ... [and] she sort of helped push people [LC members] into encouraging them to feel part of it.

Brenda is also a member of another community group in a neighbouring town and she often draws on her experiences with that group in an effort to motivate LC members to become more involved in LC initiatives. Aidan notes;

I think the [LC] has worked very well, certainly from the stories you get from others when you talk to them because [Brenda] is also a member of [a] [neighbouring community group] and she would tell you a different story about that. The [group] here is very positive.

Occasionally, Brenda also invites external agents to speak at LC meetings, developing valuable links with various government and support agencies. In general, such talks encourage deeper levels of engagement amongst members in the LC;

They [LC] did have a talk from a lady from Visit Wales which was excellent ... it told us how to get the brochures [together] ... I learnt a lot there that I didn't know (Una).

Gareth reinforced Una's comment above;

Have ... a guest speaker of some sort that provides interest ... doing a sort of ten minute slot and that will be the hook that will get the people in [attend LC meetings].

The researcher observed that when knowledge gaps arise in the LC, external expertise is sought to fill these gaps. This was evident when Dylan noted that the local bank and cash machine was due to close in the coming month; *'It [bank] is closing on the 23rd of this month and there will be facilities if you want to pay money in at the post office. I have heard that the cash dispenser is going [also]'*. LC members have raised their concerns in relation to the closure at previous meetings as noted in the minutes;

[Local] BANK: *It was reported that 3 branches in [the region] were due to close in September 2015 which included the branch in [the LC location]. Members agreed that with more people visiting the town this was not the time for a bank to close and [Brenda] agreed to write a letter of support to keep the bank open. [Brenda] and [Glenda] to liaise. ACTION: [Brenda] & [Glenda] (June 2015).*

Exhibit 6.7 details the discussion that took place amongst LC members in relation to the closure at the meeting the researcher was present at in June 2015.

Exhibit 6.7: Closure of the Bank and Cash Machine Services

Brenda and Glenda confirmed that they had sent a letter to the bank outlining the concerns of LC members in relation to the closure but they had *'not received a reply'*. As referred to above Dylan then shared with the group when the bank was due to close. As the conversation progressed it seemed that the closure of the cash machine would have a greater impact on the day-to-day running of LC businesses than the closure of the bank. Brenda stated the potential impact of the closure of the cash machine on LC businesses; *'I think that's a shame about the cash dispenser because ... that's what people need to have money to spend'*. Dylan reinforced Brenda's comment above and noted that his business is going to suffer as a result of the closure;

I find in the shop if they [customers] want to spend £2 or less with their card, I say no there is a cash machine up the road. I reckon about 80% come back I don't know where the other 20% go. I think if they have to go further that 80% would be much less.

Brenda then suggested that contactless payment would make it easier and less expensive for small businesses to accept a credit/ debit card for small amounts. However, she noted that the LC location has poor internet signal; *'we [larger tourism business] have got it [contactless payment] [but] if you have got dial up [internet] it is really slow ... the [signal] is the problem to be honest'*. Dylan also shared with the LC that he had researched the cost of such transactions;

I have inquired [at the bank] ... the charge on the average card is costing 51 pence in fees. Don't be fooled I mean I pay the quoted price of 12 pence a transaction but when all the other fees are factored in it is 51 pence because on top of that they [bank] charge you to authorise it and then the bank charge me 6 pence to put it into my account.

Gareth also contributed to the discussion and noted that; *'It is £150 odd quid to hire the machine'*. The potential impact of the bank and cash machine closure was also felt by Alan. He reflected on his own experience in his café and he then shared this with other LC members;

We have avoided having the [laser] machine with the last 15 years but we have had so many people in this year that have had no money ... people don't even carry £10 in their pocket and expect to buy a coffee for a pound [with their credit/ debit card] which in my mind is ridiculous.

As a result of the above discussion Brenda asked Darren [local bank representative];

Can you help people in the [LC] ... [by putting] them in touch with someone [who] might be able to look at getting cheaper transaction fees [on debit/ credit cards] ... because undoubtedly now with the cash machine closing there will be more people who want to use their [debit/ credit] card?.

Darren agreed to gather more information on how the cost of contactless payments could be reduced. It was highlighted in the meeting minutes that Darren had invited external expertise to talk to the LC about this issue;

In response to a question [from LC businesses], [Darren] agreed to find out from Worldpay³¹ whether contactless payments were a lower cost than taking debit and credit cards with a PIN. [Darren] said that he would also invite the Worldpay contact to the next meeting (Meeting minutes: September 2015).

(Meeting observations/ minutes: September 2015)

Some LC members have built relationships with other support agencies such as LEAD Wales that would also be of value to other members if shared with the wider LC. However, Seren notes;

At the end of the day no [we will not share ideas/ information with other LC members]. We are in this for us. We have had about 7 years of a recession [and] we have struggled ... and no if I have got some gem I am not going to pass it on.

Seren also engages with other national support agencies including the Federation of Small Businesses. Seren believes that by being an active member of this group she has a say in the issues that are facing small businesses in Wales;

We are ... members of the Federation of Small Businesses ... we are on a panel where we have questionnaires to answer once a month from the Federation of Small Businesses and that gets put to the government ... you will see [the results of the questionnaires] on the news.

6.3.6.1 Learning community relationship with the the Local Tourist Organisation

To reiterate, the LTO is represented in the LC but is also a stand alone entity. During interview Gavin noted that they (LTO) approach LC discussions from a different angle to other LC members. They by their own admission are trying to empower the community to work together. Gavin explains;

³¹ Company that processes and supports secure payments including online and contactless payments for businesses.

People [tourism businesses in the LC location] haven't yet got around to the mind-set that working together leads to more strength. It's still a bit [of] competing with each other. We [LTO] are trying to get people to see the benefits from working together ... it's a matter of bringing everyone together, which is much easier said than done because everyone is so engrossed in their own business and trying to make ends meet given the economic climate.

Gavin's perspective above was reinforced by Jennifer; '*what we [LTO] are trying to do is to get the [LC] to do more ... and leave the attitude the world owes us a living behind*'. To achieve this goal Gavin notes he visited a village in the west of Ireland to grasp opportunities/ ideas that could potentially boost collaboration amongst local tourism providers and be applied back in the LC location;

I was in [a small village in the west of Ireland] where tourism providers do a lot of work together. They are good at promoting themselves ... that's something maybe we are missing, is the confidence to say, yes we are here and it's a beautiful area but because it's an old industrial town ... there hasn't been the confidence to shout about it [LC location] and that people [might] be interested in coming here.

As referred to in section 6.3.2 the LTO has also undertaken another initiative ('buy local' scheme) in conjunction with the regional council in an effort to promote collaboration amongst tourism businesses in the LC location. Gavin believed the best way to commence this project was to try and put a package together that would involve all tourism providers in the LC location and to show them that there is value in working together. However the scheme has failed and is detailed in exhibit 6.8.

Exhibit 6.8: 'Buy local' Scheme

The LTO introduced a 'buy local' scheme which was aimed at improving collaboration amongst LC members. Gavin explains the catalyst behind the project. Gavin sent an email to all LC members outlining the details of the scheme in 2014. However, only one LC member agreed to participate in the scheme. Over the course of the case study numerous LC members commented on the initiative and some noted the reasons why they decided not to participate in the scheme. Brenda believes that the scheme would bring more people into the town centre but she feels tourism businesses cannot afford to give discounts;

I think it's a good idea [pause]. The big problem with giving people discounts is ...a lot of people in [the LC] aren't charging very much, they haven't got a lot of room to manoeuvre ... everything is quite cheap ... I think that if you start discounting again they [micro firms] are going to struggle [but] if you can get people into the shop somehow then it has got to be a good thing.

Dona is the only LC member to participate in the scheme. She noted Glenda had asked members in the past to encourage tourists to buy local and this is why she decided to join the scheme. Dona acknowledges that the initiative failed but she hopes that by being part of the scheme it will make her business more attractive to tourists;

[Glenda] from [local] council talked about it [buy local scheme] at a [LC] meeting back at the beginning of the year ... that was a thought that went into my head which spurred me on to pushing for doing this scheme [with the LTO]. I don't think the take up was huge and that may be down to politics but hopefully it will encourage more people to come to us and ... people have commented when they arrive that it's a good idea.

Alan argued that the LTO only attends LC meetings to see what they can gain for themselves. Along with many other LC members, Alan explains that the scheme was never pushed by the centre and that it was set up to make the centre look good by trying to get people to spend local;

It's [buy local scheme] a flash in the pan, it never worked. I mean it's one of [those] things that is floating around. It's on their [LTO] website and it looks good on their grant applications ... [the scheme is] non-existent.

Numerous other observations by the researcher throughout the case study reveal why other LC members did not engage in the scheme. Una believes that the LTO centre is not independent and objective. During interview she noted that the centre only works with certain tourism businesses and this is why she has not participated in the scheme. Una explains;

You hear about things happening for instance up at [the LTOs biking centre] ... they seem to have meetings on their own to organise [biking events] ... and only a certain amount of people are asked every time [to attend the meetings] and they seem to be in a clique.

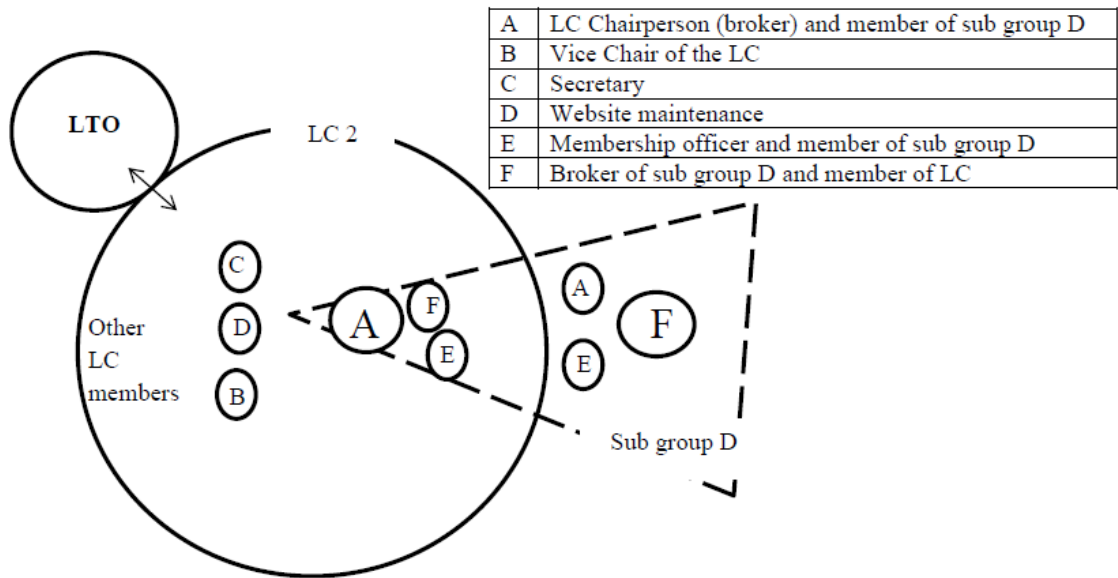
During interview Gavin contemplated why he believed the scheme failed. He feels that currently in the LC location; 'everyone [LC businesses] is so busy developing their own business [that they] can't see the wide benefits of working in collaboration'. Jennifer notes

that some LC members expect the LTO to push LC initiatives more because they were originally funded by taxpayer’s money (Welsh and European government funding);

That’s where there is a sticking point, people kind of seem to view [the LTO] as the ones that are going to do absolutely everything ... Still grant funded, loads of spare resources, well actually we don’t ... we have done what we can, [the] [LC] just need[s] to work together more to drive things forward.

In considering figure 6.3 above (p. 200), it can now be refined to reflect the relationship between the LTO and the LC. As depicted below, the LTO is trying to strengthen collaborations across the LC border; however as noted above a fragile relationship exists between the LTO and LC members.

Figure 6.4: Learning Community 2 Structure Refined



6.3.7 Case summary

Historically the case community heavily relied on manufacturing and engineering for growth in the local economy. Today, the main driver of growth in the local economy is tourism and therefore the aim of the LC is to build the LC location as a tourist destination, reinforced by the drive of the current chair, a tourism business operator. The LC has seventeen members who regularly attend LC meetings. Core members (of which there are four) have visible responsibilities in the LC with the remainder being peripheral members. The main form of communication in the LC is through meetings and resultant minutes/notifications which are emailed to all members before and after each meeting.

The LC also incorporates sub group D and is brokered by Alan. Sub group D is part of the LC but it also has an external component which is not shared with LC members (see figure 6.3 p. 200). The case illustrates that sub group D members have not effectively engaged LC members in their activities and they just assume LC members will get on board with the practice of the sub group. As a result, tensions are evident between LC members in relation to sub group D requirements of the LC because they have not been given a real opportunity to shape the practice of sub group D.

A number of larger tourism businesses have moved into the LC location over the last five/six years and these larger businesses do not appear to feel the same sense of community as other LC members. These larger tourism activity providers attract the most visitors to the LC location but they do not attend or contribute to LC meetings. As a consequence, some LC members feel there is a limit to what the group can achieve. The LTO and other businesses in the LC have tried in the past to collaborate with the larger tourism businesses but failed. In addition, findings highlight that not being fluent in the national language of Wales also influenced collaboration and engagement in the LC.

LC members have varying perspectives on the effectiveness of the group in meeting their needs. Core members believe the LC is very effective in dealing with concerns raised by

other LC members. On the other hand, peripheral members stated that the LC is dominated by core members and therefore LC discussions are steered in favour of their self-interest. This has resulted in some peripheral members becoming less involved in LC initiatives.

The LC has a number of resources such as a website, Facebook page, brochure and meeting minutes. The researcher observed that the negotiation of these resources at meetings has encouraged reflection and action amongst members over the duration of the case study. As members negotiated these resources they started to become more actively involved in group discussions as a sense of ownership began to evolve between them.

When knowledge gaps arise in the LC and when core members feel it is of value, external experts are called in to fill such gaps. This was evident when Brenda asked Darren to invite a representative from Worldpay to speak to the LC in response to the closure of the local bank and cash dispenser in the LC location (as outlined in exhibit 6.7, p. 227). At an individual level, findings also highlight that some LC members (Una) have tried to establish a relationship with a neighbouring tourism community group but the existence of local council administrative boundaries resulted in her being unable to join. The final decision to allow outside businesses join neighbouring groups lies with the group they want to join. Findings also demonstrate that some LC members have relationships with external support agencies that would potentially be of value to other members if they were shared.

The LTO is an independent entity to the LC. However, the LTO is trying to promote collaboration amongst LC members by offering LC businesses the opportunity to participate in a 'buy local' scheme, but they have failed (see exhibit 6.8 above, p. 230). The failure of this scheme is mainly due to community politics as members perceive the LTO to be a surface member of the LC (as illustrated in figure 6.4, p. 231).

A summary of the key findings from the Welsh case community is outlined in table 6.8 below.

Table 6.8: Key Welsh Findings

Learning theme	LC2 - Wales
LC aim	Develop the LC location as a tourist destination
Catalyst for collaboration	Emanated externally -European and Welsh government funding and subsequent establishment of a number of large tourism activity businesses in the area
Structure and leadership	<p>Dynamic and inclusive/ chaotic and self-interested - perceptions varied amongst core and peripheral members;</p> <p>Membership: fee, blurred criteria and boundary;</p> <p>Responsibilities: individuals democratically elected by other members to the LC committee - remaining members (peripheral) have elusive responsibilities;</p> <p>Communication flows are ineffective between LC members and between sub group D members and LC members</p>
Participation and identity	<p>Participation encouraged through action points in meeting minutes;</p> <p>Identity development constrained beyond dominant core members – influenced by lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities;</p> <p>Participation influenced by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Formal and community/ voluntary roles; local tourism champion key in encouraging wider participation; -Balancing cooptation; -Legitimacy of newcomers.
Interrelationships	<p>Members feel a sense of belongingness from participation in the LC;</p> <p>Strong disconnect between the larger and smaller businesses in the LC;</p> <p>Influenced by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Selection criteria; -Power dynamics; core and active members (Brenda, Aidan, Dona and Anna) steer LC discussions in favour of their own business; -Potential tangible/ intangible benefits to LC members; -Cultural barriers - language; -Impact of publically funded LTO on LC location.
Learning development	<p>Negotiation of learning community resources (tourism brochure, meeting minutes, website, Facebook and funding applications) encourages reflection and promotes shared meaning and mutual understanding amongst members;</p> <p>Influenced by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Dominant collective core impeding peripheral

	<p>members taking ownership of learning;</p> <p>-Some members lack the competence to take ownership of their learning;</p> <p>-Absence of a shared history/ trust amongst the majority of LC members including the LTO/ other larger tourism activity businesses.</p>
External relationships	<p>Broker leverages external expertise to fill knowledge gaps when they arise in the LC and encourages members to engage with other local tourism/ community groups and national support agencies;</p> <p>Influenced by tension – LTO trying to collaborate with LC businesses;</p> <p>Individual LC members unable to join external tourism groups due to the existence of administrative council boundaries.</p>

6.4 Findings summary

This chapter outlined the findings from each case site paying particular attention to the elements and relationships that influence learning amongst micro firm O/Ms and other tourism stakeholders. The findings from the case sites reveal some similarities but also a number of significant differences. For example, the structure of the LCs is different in Canada and Wales. Although both LCs comprise public and private actors, the configuration of these members in each group varies. Conceptual themes that were identified from the literature review assisted the researcher in understanding the dynamic learning relationships between micro firm O/Ms and other stakeholders in each LC. The key findings are repeated here for clarity in table 6.9, revealing the similarities and differences between the case sites and these criteria are discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

Table 6.9: Summary Findings: Canadian and Welsh Case Communities

Learning theme	LC1 - Canada	LC2 - Wales
LC aim	Build a community capacity in tourism and develop the LC location as a destination	Develop the LC location as a tourist destination
Catalyst for collaboration	External catalyst dictated rules of engagement - multi-million local mill redevelopment	Emanated externally -European and Welsh government funding and subsequent establishment of a number of large tourism activity businesses in the area
Structure and leadership	<p>Rigid, closed group;</p> <p>Membership - strict selection criteria and boundary;</p> <p>Responsibilities: core members (visible) versus peripheral members (elusive);</p> <p>Communication is didactic: consultants and RTO4 facilitate LC meetings.</p>	<p>Dynamic and inclusive/ chaotic and self-interested - perceptions varied amongst core and peripheral members;</p> <p>Membership: fee, blurred criteria and boundary;</p> <p>Responsibilities: individuals democratically elected by other members to the LC committee - remaining members (peripheral) have elusive responsibilities;</p> <p>Communication flows are ineffective between LC members and between sub group D members and LC members.</p>
Participation and identity	<p>Core members encourage participation both formally (emails) and informally (conversations);</p> <p>Identity development stifled beyond dominant broker core - influenced by member responsibility in the LC;</p> <p>Participation influenced by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Formal and community/ voluntary roles; local tourism champion key in encouraging wider participation; -Anticipated outcomes of the tourism strategy by members; -Constrained resources of micro firm O/Ms; -Balancing coopetition; -Trust. 	<p>Participation encouraged through action points in meeting minutes;</p> <p>Identity development constrained beyond dominant core members – influenced by lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities;</p> <p>Participation influenced by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Formal and community/ voluntary roles; local tourism champion key in encouraging wider participation; -Balancing coopetition; -Legitimacy of newcomers.
Interrelationships	<p>Discussion of potential business opportunities amongst LC businesses encourages greater cohesiveness;</p> <p>Evident disconnect between the LC businesses/ location and</p>	<p>Members feel a sense of belongingness from participation in the LC;</p> <p>Strong disconnect between the larger and smaller businesses in the LC;</p>

	<p>consultants/ RTO4 members;</p> <p>Influenced by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Selection criteria; -Power dynamics: core members (RTO; consultants and large business) have more influence in the LC than peripheral members (micro firms); -Potential tangible/ intangible benefits to LC members; -Impact of privately funded local mill development; -Historical tensions that still divide the two municipalities that form the LC location. 	<p>Influenced by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Selection criteria; -Power dynamics: core and active members (Brenda, Aidan, Dona and Anna) steer LC discussions in favour of their own business; -Potential tangible/ intangible benefits to LC members; -Cultural barriers - language; -Impact of publically funded LTO on LC location.
Learning development	<p>Influenced by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Structure of tourism services in the LC location impacting learner autonomy; -Learning set: action bias impedes learner autonomy development; -Consultants facilitating workshops: members will find it difficult to take the leadership baton once they step back; -Absence of a shared history amongst business O/Ms within the group hindering LC negotiations. 	<p>Negotiation of learning community resources (tourism brochure, meeting minutes, website, Facebook and funding applications) encourages reflection and promotes shared meaning and mutual understanding amongst members;</p> <p>Influenced by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Dominant collective core impeding peripheral members taking ownership of learning; -Some members lack the competence to take ownership of their learning; -Absence of a shared history/ trust amongst the majority of LC members and the LTO other larger tourism activity businesses.
External relationships	<p>Negotiation of strategy currently does not occur at community level;</p> <p>Broader engagement in the strategy once made public may be influenced by community politics;</p> <p>Some LC members contemplated:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Development of a tourism brand could assist with integrating external businesses into the strategy; -Education programme to highlight the value of the tourism strategy to external businesses in the LC location. 	<p>Broker leverages external expertise to fill knowledge gaps when they arise in the LC and encourages members to engage with other local tourism/ community groups and national support agencies;</p> <p>Influenced by tension – LTO trying to collaborate with LC businesses;</p> <p>Individual LC members unable to join external tourism groups due to the existence of administrative council boundaries.</p>

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter detailed the case findings from both the Canadian (LC1) and Welsh (LC2) LCs. LC1 is currently being facilitated by the consultants, while LC2 is an independent tourism practitioner community. Findings highlight some similarities but also significant differences between the cases (see table 6.9 above). For example, while both cases demonstrate that the enticement and preservation of learner autonomy is challenging, a key difference between the cases relates to the structure of each LC. LC1 is a closed group with strict criteria for membership, while LC2 is more inclusive with core members being democratically elected. Other key differences relate to the boundary of each LC and diverse forms of participation that are evident in LC2. As a result, the elements and relationships that influence learner autonomy in this context will differ in each case.

The next chapter will discuss these key research findings from each case in detail in relation to the relevant literature. The evolving LC model will then be refined based on the multi-country findings.

Chapter Seven

Discussion

7.0 Chapter overview

The preceding chapter outlined the findings from the learning communities (LCs) in Canada (LC1) and Wales (LC2) and provided case accounts of the elements and relationships that influence learning, as members participate in the practice of tourism development in each location. This chapter synthesises the findings from the two case sites in liaison with extant literature so that the elements and relationships that support or impede learner autonomy within evolving LCs can be identified (as per research objective (RO) 3).

Rural tourism development is characterised as a complex process due to the existence of a dynamic set of stakeholders with competing interests (Halme, 2001; Timur and Getz, 2008; Waligo et al., 2013), who derive diverse meanings as they participate in the practice of the local tourism community (Gibson et al., 2005; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007). While engagement in facilitated LCs can strengthen the complex relationships between micro firms and other stakeholders in the community (Florén and Tell, 2004; Kelliher et al., 2009; Morrison et al., 2004; Phillipson et al., 2004; Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012) as a dedicated broker supports learning through collaborative relationships in the course of practice (Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Marsden et al. 2010), LC1 findings highlight that it can hamper LC development if the facilitator is overly dominant (Nieminen and Lemmetyinen, 2015).

Learning strategies adopted by the broker in the facilitated setting will enhance learning regardless of their implicit or explicit learning focus, as they encourage the development of collaborative relationships that can support rural tourism development (Komppula, 2004; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003) and overcome micro firm resource constraints and external

environmental shocks. Learning strategies produce benefits including learning barrier release, knowledge transfer and competence development (Florén 2003; Kelliher and Reinl 2010). As LC2 is an independent tourism practitioner community, findings suggest that in the absence of facilitated support certain strategies that are employed in this environment, for example the learning set, would support evolution if adopted in this LC (as per Halme, 2001; Morrison et al., 2004; Reinl and Kelliher, 2010).

It is likely, however, that sustaining learning in an evolving LC context will be challenging given the dynamics of how rural micro firms learn independently and together (Pavlovich, 2003; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007). There is limited research focusing on learning interactions amongst rural micro firms in an evolving LC environment (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014); this research addresses this gap. The discussion that follows offers insights into how the catalyst, structure and leadership, communication, learning strategies, resources, participation and identity and boundary criteria support or impede micro firm learner autonomy and influences the evolving LC's learning dynamic (RO 1-3). While similarities are apparent between the two case sites, this chapter will also highlight and discuss the differences in relation to the elements and relationships that support or impede micro firm learner autonomy. This chapter concludes by identifying key criteria that influence learner autonomy in an evolving LC context and include the interplay between broker support and broker step back, the crucial role of communication amongst LC members and resultant negotiation of conflict and boundary interactions. These criteria inform the refinement of the conceptual evolving LC model (RO4). Recommendations regarding optimised evolving LC support mechanisms at local, regional and national level are outlined in the following chapter; ultimately contributing to rural regional policy development in each domain.

7.1 Catalyst for learning community formation

A LC can emerge organically from within the rural tourism community itself or under an external catalyst (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001). In both LCs, the catalyst for tourism micro firm collaboration emanated externally, with a central focus on tourism development in each case location. For Kelliher and Reinl (2009) and Phillipson et al. (2004), an external impulse is often required for collaboration to be triggered amongst tourism stakeholders within a micro firm LC. This is identifiable in both cases as the catalyst for collaboration emerges from the major revitalisation of the local mill in LC1, and numerous members of the LC anticipated the benefits this development would bring to their businesses and the LC location once the mill reopened; *'to help increase community engagement and support as well as build their destinations'* (DestinationNEXT report). LC2 successfully secured £4.5m in European and Welsh government funding and also commenced a major regeneration project, realising that this represented *'a massive opportunity'* for the location. The external funding catalyst prompted collaboration amongst LC2 members as it gave them *'more confidence'* to capitalise on the opportunities that will likely ensue as a result of stronger tourism development in the area. Indeed, the importance of funding in terms of promoting collaborative learning activity amongst LC members has been referred to by Morrison et al. (2004). Appropriate funding is necessary in part to sustain an autonomous LC in the longer term.

It is imperative that rural tourism micro firms develop relationships with other stakeholders in their community in order to remain competitive and overcome resource and market challenges and feelings of isolation (Ahmad, 2005; Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Down, 1999; Jack et al., 2010; March and Wilkinson, 2009; Morrison et al., 2004; Schaper et al., 2005; Steiner and Atterton, 2015). Based on case findings, the vast majority of micro firm owner/ managers (O/Ms) in LC1 recognise the importance of working with others, while in LC2 the micro firms are only beginning to recognise that *'there is strength in working together [and] not being an individual provider'* (Gavin). The development of collaborative relationships amongst micro firms and other rural tourism stakeholders is particularly important to the sustainability of rural communities, as economic growth will be enhanced in these areas as a result (Brouder and Eriksson, 2013; Komppula, 2004; Perren, 1999; Phillipson et al., 2004; Reijonen and Komppula, 2007). However, each LC

agrees that a certain level of trust must exist for initial collaboration to occur (Ahlström-Söderling, 2003; Florén, 2003; Florén and Tell, 2004; Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012) and the role of the broker in strengthening social bonds amongst members is important in this context (Halme, 2001; Jämsä et al., 2011; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Morrison et al., 2004; Nieminen and Lemmetyinen, 2015; Valkering et al., 2013).

In LC1, the Regional Tourism Organisation 4 (RTO4) recognise the need for collaboration amongst members and this is important in the pursuit of sustainable rural tourism development (Heidari et al., 2014; Morrison et al., 2004; Steiner and Atterton, 2015; Pavlovich, 2003). However, RTO4 lack the resources to facilitate this activity and therefore they have contracted a consultant team from Vancouver to work with the local tourism coordinator (Emma) and local tourism businesses/ stakeholders in the development of the local tourism strategy; *'Resources in addition to RTO staff time are sourced from a variety of outside consulting and operating groups both private and public on an RFP [request for proposal] basis'* (RTO4 business plan). As the RTO4 and consultants are based in a different region to the LC, it may be difficult to establish an ethos of trust due to the absence of a shared history between them, and other LC members; *'considerable work is needed to develop and execute a destination plan in concert with [local tourism stakeholders]'* (RTO4). For Jämsä et al. (2011) and Lave and Wenger (1991) a shared history amongst LC members has been shown to strengthen relationships and encourage deeper participation in LC practice (Campbell et al., 2009; Thompson, 2005; Wenger et al., 2002). In its absence (as may be the case in the early stages of LC evolution), it is unlikely that members will fully engage in practice as trust needs to be built over time as members collaborate (Florén and Tell, 2004; Morrison et al., 2004); *'I am not going to talk about some of my new initiatives'* (LC1: Hailey).

LC2 findings highlight that the relationship between the micro firms and larger tourism activity businesses in the LC is a problematic one due to community politics, power imbalance and an absence of a shared history. For Wenger (1998) it is unlikely that a collaborative learning ethos will be embedded in LC2 as the the larger tourism activity businesses must participate in practice for this to occur, which they currently do not. In the absence of a *'close relationship'*, the larger tourism activity businesses *'seem to be in a*

clique', making it difficult to establish shared meaning amongst LC members as '*there is not that [level of] collaboration*'. Therefore, both cases reinforce the findings of Fuller-Love and Thomas (2004) and Florén and Tell (2004) in that trustful relationships develop over time through shared history of collaborative practice. This has important implications for the initial and subsequent management of a LC that can be sustainable and promote learner autonomy over the longer term.

7.1.2 Initial learning community management

In the absence of trust developed in a shared history amongst members and a subsequent power imbalance, newcomers may never fully engage in LC practice (Campbell et al., 2009; Wenger, 1998); '*I would like to be more involved [but only] if ... [core members] [would] let go of some of that control*' (LC2: Lauren), and therefore LC sustainability is impeded (Jørgensen, 2007; Jørgensen and Keller, 2008; Lave and Wenger, 1991). Valkering et al. (2013) note that effective LC communication can overcome political tensions and accommodate divergent motivations. While RTO4 conveyed that '*initiatives will be far more successful*' once they step back, it is evident that the value of learning sets and the support of the broker who can assist micro firms in alleviating barriers to learning and knowledge exchange (Jämsä et al., 2011; Heidari et al., 2014) are required in a LC over the longer term (Halme, 2001; Jack et al., 2010; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011; Morrison et al., 2004). Both case findings reinforce this, as historical tensions exist between the two municipalities that form LC1; '*I have never known two communities to hate each other so much*' (James) and some micro firms are not willing to share information with other members during group discussions due to the fear that they will use this knowledge in the future to compete against them; '*You don't want to pass your business to somebody who's going to then steal your business*' (LC2: Seren), which Kelliher et al. (2014) refer to as knowledge hoarding.

If knowledge hoarding is prevalent in a micro firm LC, it is likely that learner autonomy will be impeded and the sustainability of the LC will be challenging (Reinl and Kelliher, 2010; Uzzi, 1997) and therefore a cooperative ethos needs to underpin LC practice

according to Kelliher et al.'s (2014) findings. The learning set and the support of the broker is particularly valuable in this context in terms of encouraging the development of shared meaning amongst LC members (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Wenger et al., 2011), and as this evolves members can continue to learn together in the practice of tourism development (Lave and Wenger, 1991). For example, as LC1 evolved, findings demonstrate that trust and shared meaning started to build amongst members as they engaged in the learning set resulting in the learning process being enhanced (Florén and Tell, 2004; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011; Wenger, 1998). Hailey started to '*understand the need* [to share her business ideas] *for the big picture*' and that coopetition needed to be balanced in the group for the strategy to be sustained once the consultants/ RTO4 members faded into the background.

While facilitated network support such as education interventions for example, can result in the enhancement of competence (Chell and Baines, 2000; Florén, 2003; Reinl and Kelliher, 2010) and the development of social relationships amongst members (Jämsä et al., 2011; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Valkering et al., 2013), it can also impede learner autonomy if relationships are 'managed' rather than 'facilitated' (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Nieminen and Lemmetyinen, 2015). In LC1, while the consultants note that '*facilitation provides full participation, sufficient input flow, and productive outcomes*'; they have underestimated what 'full participation' entails from a LC perspective. Full participation requires more than an individual's connection to a LC and involves active engagement in the practice of the social community (Wenger, 1998: 55). Findings highlight that the current leadership style adopted by the consultants is hindering the ability of members to engage with and understand LC resources, and hence negotiate their meaning with others, which is a vital component of learning (Handley et al., 2006; Lave and Wenger, 1991). If this leadership structure persists in LC1, it is likely that members will struggle to take ownership of practices and resources within the community when the consultants/ RTO4 members take a step back (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 37; Wenger, 1998) and therefore LC sustainability will be hampered.

In summary, the catalyst for LC formation in both cases arose externally; as did its initial management, which facilitated initial collaboration between LC members, consultant and

local government stakeholders. Despite the motivations of the brokers to build the LC locations as stronger tourism destinations, they failed to establish the foundations to build trustful relationships between members without shared histories of learning. This will challenge the likelihood of individuals becoming autonomous learners (Wenger, 1998). These LC catalyst criteria are essential for evolving LC sustainability and are tabulated in 7.1 below.

Table 7.1: Learning Community Catalyst Influencing Learner Autonomy

	LC Catalyst	Learner autonomy supported	Learner autonomy impeded
LC1	External catalyst: Funding and redevelopment of the local mill.		Absence of shared history and ethos of trust impedes negotiation amongst members.
LC2	External catalyst: Major town regeneration project aided by European and Welsh government funding.		Development of shared meaning constrained if community politics, power imbalance and absence of a shared history are not managed effectively.

7.2 Learning community configuration

The following section discusses structure and leadership in each case community. Specific attention is paid to how the structure and leadership of each LC influences learner autonomy and LC sustainability.

7.2.1 Structure and leadership

Membership in both LCs consists of a variety of public and private representatives operating at local, regional and national level. The tourism networks literature acknowledges the importance of both public and private sectors working together in the pursuit of sustainable rural tourism development (Andersson and Getz, 2009; Halme, 2001; Halme and Fadeeva, 2000; Timur and Getz, 2008) as such collaboration can lead to a *'proper community effort'*. There is the perception that public actors are *'highly capable of fostering the community collaboration and stakeholder engagement necessary to achieving true success in developing [tourism communities]'* (RTO4), as they provide vital financial and managerial resources that private tourism operators often lack (March and Wilkinson, 2009), particularly micro firms (Devins et al., 2005; Phillipson et al., 2004; Raley and Moxey, 2000). Public actors and the resources they provide can enhance the sustainability of rural tourism LCs (Levin, 1993; Steiner and Atterton, 2015), but only if divergent perspectives and motivations are balanced between the sectors (Gibson et al., 2005; Halme, 2001; Valkering et al., 2013).

In both LCs, the majority of resources are provided by public actors. In LC1, *'[RTO4] is paying big bucks for them [consultants]'* (Emma), while LC2 findings demonstrate that public representatives within the LC such as Glenda (regional councillor) are often called upon to source finance for group activities; *'[Glenda] donated £500 and the town council donated £500 [towards the production of the new tourism brochure]'* (Alan). This LC structure (mixture of private and public actors) should support learner autonomy as rural micro firms can gain multi-level stakeholder knowledge and resources that are usually beyond their reach, which can result in positive commercial and community outcomes

(Gibson et al., 2005; Kelliher et al., 2014; Steiner and Atterton, 2015). LC2 findings demonstrate this, as without Glenda's influence and knowledge it is unlikely that the car park charges would have been reduced in the LC location; '[Glenda] *can help with things that we [LC committee] don't have the power to help with ... like the car park [charges]*' (Brenda).

In LC1, financial and managerial resources necessary to support the LC initially are being provided by RTO4, these include facilitating LC meetings, logistic planning, minute taking, tourism development expertise and funding, much of which is via the consultants and Sarah (strategy project manager). Such support is necessary in the early stages of LC formation as Emma explains without it '*I don't think it [the LC] would work so well*', but with that support '*I think this group will be [capable of functioning]*'. While Waligo et al.'s (2013) research supports this finding that effective LC leadership is required initially, Kelliher and Reinl (2011) note that if members over rely on the broker [consultants] to '*put together answers or findings*' on their behalf, the likelihood of members becoming autonomous learners is impeded.

RTO4 is mainly funded by the Ontario government and is expected to provide clear leadership, and support a more collaborative approach to growing competitive and sustainable tourism in its region by working with industry partners. RTO4 outlined in its business plan for 2015/ 2016 that '*the goal is to greatly increase operator capability*' to ensure that future projects will be sustainable once they step back. For Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt (2012), Lave and Wenger (1991) and Nieminen and Lemmetyinen (2015), the awareness that it takes time to develop an individual's leadership skills is particularly important in terms of sustaining independent LC activity. Michael (RTO4: tourism business development specialist) shared with other members that the strategy is not a short-term commitment and once it is determined LC members will need to '*take it into [their] own hands*' and implement the strategy in the LC location. This demonstrates that the micro firms/ other tourism stakeholders are expected to take the leadership baton in the future (discussed further in the following section). However, based on research findings this transition is likely to be challenging as the RTO4/ consultants have overlooked the development of learner competence that is required to sustain the LC such as encouraging

the development of social relationships amongst members (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Garavan et al., 2007; Jaouen and Lasch, 2015; Morrison et al., 2004). As a result, Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) note that members will struggle to take charge of their learning and sustain LC evolution once the consultants/ RTO4 members take a step back.

The consultants also act in a broker capacity and they facilitate LC1 meetings. They produce reports that act as '*an aid for discussion*' and '*they ask the questions*' at LC meetings. LC1 findings demonstrate that the style of facilitation being employed by the consultants during the development of the strategy is mainly directive in nature as they dominate LC discussions. As of Autumn 2015 (the third workshop), there is little evidence of phased progression to suggest that the consultant facilitation style will change to a more enabling form in the future, which is an important factor in supporting progressive learner autonomy (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Morrison et al., 2004; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007). This was evident when LC discussions focused on '*the lack of connectivity between [the two LC municipalities]*' and the impact this will have on tourism development in both LC municipalities when the local mill reopens as visitors '*are unlikely to travel to [the other LC municipality] during the evening (e.g. dinner or a show) unless they have a transportation option that doesn't require them to drive*' (LC1: Key observations summary report). The consultants suggested that transportation options '*do not need to be confined to publicly-funded transit*' and they noted a number of alternative ideas and opportunities with only occasional input from the micro firms/ Local Tourist Organisation (LTO) and township members. Another example of how the consultant's directive approach is unlikely to change in the near future was evident during the third workshop when the consultants asked members to consider '*animating the online presence of the [LC location]*'. The consultants recommended that '*an opportunity to book restaurants and accommodations online*' could be useful in this regard among other suggestions with little input from other LC members. For Reinl and Kelliher (2010) and Lave and Wenger (1991) the broker must ensure that they balance support by allowing members to contribute to practice or else the likelihood of these individuals becoming autonomous learners and sustaining independent LC activity is hindered.

Conversely, in LC2, the dominant role of core members is hindering the process of building shared meaning and community level learning (Jørgensen, 2007; Lave and Wenger, 1991); *'closed questions, closed answers, lack of opportunity for people to contribute and their opinions to be considered before decisions are made [by core members]'* (Lauren). Findings demonstrate that this is due to control by core members which subsequently impacts the establishment of a community ethos, and therefore Garavan et al. (2007: 38) note that *'the community of practice needs to develop... [a] socially defined way of doing things'* for shared meaning to build amongst members. For Nieminen and Lemmetyinen (2015) and Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt (2012), in terms of promoting learner autonomy and sustaining both LCs, it is important that the broker avoids *'expert consultancy'*. This is particularly important if LC members are to be capable of taking the leadership baton once the broker takes a step back from the community and this is discussed next.

7.2.1.1 Contemplating the transition of leadership

Findings indicate that at this stage of the tourism strategy's development, the consultants/RTO4 members have done little to ensure that the transition of leadership to the local rural tourism broker (Emma) will be successful and a reliance on the consultants is evident; *'We [LC] are really going to take their [consultants] lead'* (Emma). Despite Michael (RTO4) anticipating that the transition will be *'smooth'*, the consultant's dominance in LC1 is hampering the development of learner autonomy which can lead to issues of over-reliance (Sadler-Smith et al., 2000) and this may be amplified in a micro firm context due to resource criteria (Florén, 2003; Murphy et al., 2015; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014), if broker support is not balanced with a broker step back phase (Waligo et al., 2013). For Valkering et al. (2013), broker control in LC1 will need to be decentralised if knowledge creation is to occur and phased autonomy supported (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). This would enhance the sustainability of LC1 practice in the longer term. In addition to this, the development of crucial leadership skills has been overlooked and the promotion of a self-reliance culture (Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014) has been dissuaded leaving those who are required to take up the leadership baton ill-equipped to do so; *'I don't guarantee that I have the skill sets. This is whole new turf for*

me' (Emma). Ultimately, they are unable to learn *'in a more self-organised and autonomous way'* (Valkering et al., 2013: 87).

Despite still being constrained by dominant consultants, findings demonstrate that the micro firms/ LTO and township members in LC1 are beginning to contemplate ownership of the strategy, demonstrating the emergence of learner autonomy. For example, these members have started to contemplate the sustainability of the LC once the strategy is made public and the consultants/ RTO4 members have faded into the background. While *'[LC members] are all in agreement that [they] need buy in from the community ... first [before actions from the strategy can be translated into practice]'* (Hailey), it is likely that LC members will find it difficult to engage these businesses in the strategy once the consultants/ RTO4 members take a step back as they are currently not involved in its negotiation, which is crucial for sustained participation and learning in an independent context (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Morrison et al., 2004). Furthermore, gaining the support of external businesses may be difficult due to them being overlooked and excluded at the request of the consultants in the early stages of LC establishment (Fuller-love and Thomas, 2004). Community politics may compound this division between LC members (micro firms) and those more established businesses in the community (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014) that they value and seek to engage in the evolution of the LC's practice; *'there might be a seniority thing going on'* (Hailey). Based on case findings, the consultants/ RTO4 members are likely to support the LC with integrating external stakeholders into the strategy before they take a step back; *'They [consultants/ RTO4] are going to be with us [LC] to see it [strategy] through to fruition'* (Emma), which is particularly important in terms of LC sustainability (Jack et al., 2010). However, support from the consultants/ RTO4 members will need to be balanced if denied or passive learning is to be avoided (Kelliher and Reinl, 2011).

The micro firms/ LTO and township members are beginning to think beyond the current communication structure and how it might evolve into a more inclusive form once they take a more central position in the LC when the consultants step back. Emma, Ryan and Hailey highlight the requirement to educate external businesses so that they can *'see what's in it [strategy] for them'* (Emma). For such a programme to be successful it must be

delivered informally as this is the preferred approach to learning by micro firms (as per Greenbank, 2000; Matlay, 1999; Jaouen and Lasch, 2015). In addition, the programme should be delivered by the local LC stakeholders as it is more likely that common ground will have been established amongst them and external businesses from prior practice; *'I would say half the people in the room are not from [the LC municipalities] ... they [external micro firms and other tourism businesses] don't really know who these people are so their not going to listen to them'* (Hailey). For Valkering et al. (2013) if stakeholders have learned together in the practice of tourism development previously, it is more likely that knowledge boundaries will be crossed more smoothly (Halme, 2001), thereby enhancing independent learning in practice.

In LC2, Brenda (LC broker) explains that she would like to take a step back *'and let somebody else have a go at being the chair'* of the LC, but she feels other members will struggle to sustain the group if she did, as the majority run small businesses and are time constrained. Brenda explains that the workload can be high and *'time consuming'* and as a result she finds it difficult to complete all of her LC tasks. If LC management responsibilities are solely left to the local rural tourism broker, the literature suggests that leadership/ broker burn out will occur (Ahlström-Söderling, 2003; Marsden et al., 2010; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). Therefore, the latter studies note that broader member responsibility should be utilised in an independent LC by rotating core member roles, as individuals can take ownership of their learning by negotiating the problems and requirements associated with these roles, as Friedman and Desivilya (2010) note in a rural development context.

During the case study a new vice-chair was elected (Nicole) in LC2 and it was hoped that this new position would help ease leadership/ broker burn out by *'spread[ing] the [work]load a little bit'*. Although Brenda anticipated that the appointment of Nicole to the LC committee may be enough to ease her current workload, others felt that a full-time marketing coordinator was needed to keep LC initiatives moving. Findings highlight that such support can ease learning barriers (Valkering et al., 2013) amongst rural tourism micro firms, resulting in members having extra time to translate practice into actions.

7.2.1.2 Roles/ responsibilities

In each LC, there are several examples in the case findings which highlight core members having clear responsibilities, while those of peripheral members are not clearly defined. This may be indicative of the early stage of LC development and its subsequent evolution as learner identities are in flux. In an effort to improve the structure of LC2 meetings, *'action points'* have been incorporated into the meeting minutes. Ideally, as members negotiate these actions, identities will emerge (Wenger, 1998) and as this happens they begin to understand their responsibility in the LC (as Hara (2009) points out). However, Lauren's (a newcomer) acknowledgment that some actions from meetings do not transfer back into practice is because some members are still unsure of *'who's responsible for what'* which leads to *'the same people doing the same things'* (Gavin). For Handley et al. (2006) and Lave and Wenger (1991), when the roles of members are indistinct it is likely that the learning momentum will stall, hindering the development of autonomous learning in practice.

In LC1, peripheral members are finding it difficult to understand LC practice because *'the only responsibility has been ... to show up [at LC meetings]'* (Hailey) and therefore they feel that they are unable to effectively engage in the LC. As a result, peripheral members have started to question LC practice; *'What are we [LC] doing?'* According to Lave and Wenger (1991) an individual needs to understand their role in a LC to be capable of full intelligent participation in practice. The broker can ensure individuals understand their role by encouraging them to engage in the negotiation of practice, which is fundamental in the pursuit of establishing shared meaning (Lave and Wenger, 1991; McAreavey and McDonagh, 2011; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014) and sustaining a collaborative LC structure (Garavan et al., 2007). For Hara (2009), as shared meaning develops amongst members from engaging in the negotiation process, the likelihood of individuals taking ownership of practice will be supported. LC1 findings support Hara's (2009) finding and this is evident during the third workshop when LC1 members started to negotiate the sports tourism variable. While the discussion was instigated by the consultants; *'What are the opportunities for sports tourism?'*, a general consensus was reached by members that the LC location *'resources are not there yet [for sports tourism]'*, and therefore all members

agreed that *'there is a lack of leadership on the ground ... to point people to places in [the LC location] from sports tourism'* (Meeting observation). It is clear that when the consultants gave members the opportunity to question the suitability of the LC location for sports tourism, future practice was reshaped, which is particularly important in terms of supporting learner autonomy and pursuing sustainable collaboration amongst community members (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Wenger, 1998).

In LC2, peripheral members have the perception that core members (Brenda, Dona, Anna and Aidan) have more authority in the LC and that they often steer discussions to benefit their own business; *'the vested interest of certain people who have senior roles manipulates some of the potential for change to happen'* (Lauren). This has resulted in tension between core and peripheral members as all members should be *'in the loop'* and have a voice in the future development of the community (Fuller-Love and Thomas, 2004), if it is to be sustainable (Wenger, 1998).

It is evident that the dominant core structure in LC2 is causing the boundary of the LC to be blurred, as peripheral members cannot differentiate the LC's activities from sub group D's activities; *'You have got all of these splinter groups ... they all kind of do the same thing'* (Gavin). Indeed, the structure of sub group D and its impact on LC sustainability and learner autonomy is notable and is discussed next.

7.2.1.2.1 Learning community 2: Sub group D

Sub group D is brokered by Alan, with Brenda and Anna being active members in this group. These individuals are also core members in LC2 (see figure 6.3, p. 200). Sub group D hold separate meetings to the LC and only report surface information back to LC members. However, sub group D members rely on the support of LC members in running the two tourism events that they organise in the LC location and associated activities which include running stalls and *'shaking the bucket [collecting donations]'* during these events. Despite LC members being called on to engage in sub group D activities; *'What we need*

now is a [sub group D] meeting before firework night [sub group D event]' (Brenda), LC members do not have the opportunity to shape the practice of sub group D and therefore the vast majority of LC members cannot relate to its practice and *'if [sub group D] is not actually doing anything well then just forget it'*. Based on findings from Wenger (1998) and Halme (2001), it is unlikely that LC members will engage in sub group D practice, as they do not have access to the resources of the community (documents, stories and rules) which can act as seeding structures between the two groups if they are open to negotiated development on a community wide basis. As this is currently not the case, a crucial step for LC sustainability (Li et al., 2009; Wenger, 1998) is hampered which will stifle the development of shared meaning and a joint enterprise amongst the groups according to Wenger (1998) findings. While findings suggest that some of the core members in the LC understand why the groups need to be separated, those outside the core require assistance to fully understand the knowledge and learning dynamics of sub group D (as Lave and Wenger (1991) note).

7.2.1.3 Membership criteria

While membership criteria can help determine an individual's learner identity, it can also impede LC practice and learner autonomy as it can restrict fresh ideas/ experiences from newcomers (Bathelt et al., 2004; Brouder and Eriksson, 2013; Morrison et al., 2004). Membership in LC1 is *'selective'* and the *'targeted group'* suggests a closed LC. Furthermore, LC member selection was motivated by the vested interests of those in the most powerful/ dominant positions in the LC. This was evident when senior management in the township did not select Leah (from Emma's recommendations) to be part of the LC although she was *'someone pretty vocal'* and would bring valuable local tourism knowledge to LC practice. This leadership structure is likely to result in passive learning and is counter-intuitive to autonomous learning (Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Lave and Wenger, 1991), as members lack the autonomy to draw on valuable local knowledge sources that induce learning opportunities (Brouder and Eriksson, 2013), indicating that the LC border is closed (Florén and Tell, 2004). In addition, the strict criteria for selecting members also implies that politics influences the LC. Some micro firm O/Ms in the LC location have not been asked to join LC1 because it was anticipated by the LTO/ township

members that the resource constraints faced by these businesses could potentially lead to non-participation in the longer term; *'sometimes it just doesn't work out'*.

Selection criteria also impacts practice in LC1 as suggestions by members in relation to the development of the strategy cannot be acted upon because the businesses associated with those ideas are excluded and *'would need to be involved [in the LC] in order to make it happen'* (Consultant: findings report). However, discussing selection criteria encourages micro firm O/Ms to reflect on other businesses that they feel may add value to the group; *'I would like to see [the water] conservation [authority] in the group ... we [LC] could work more with them'* (Hannah). Findings emphasise that this is unlikely to happen as the LTO and township members believe that the right businesses are already members of the LC; *'the tourism partners that are at the table ... understand that we all need to succeed together'* (Emma). If this continues to be the case, the LC will be a locked-in environment (Uzzi, 1997) where learner autonomy will be impeded as the negotiation process is hampered (Florén and Tell, 2004; Kelliher et al., 2014) in the absence of external sources of knowledge. For Valkering et al. (2013), if external sources of knowledge are not part of the LC's structure, a rich learning process will be hindered which will challenge the sustainability of the LC.

A diverse membership base is required to prevent knowledge redundancy (Halme, 2001) and underpin self-sustainability (Marsden et al., 2010). Some LC2 members recognise that a diverse membership leads to a *'good network of communication between people'* which can enhance business opportunities, while others had varying perspectives. *'Geographical spread [distance]'* is one concern and vague and inconsistent criteria set out in the LCs constitution; *'geographical area covered by the [local] post-code and others nearby'* left members struggling to put a boundary on LC membership. Tellingly, members whose businesses are located outside the LC location are unwilling to share their business ideas with those who operate within the LC mirroring the findings of Shaw and Williams (2009) regarding the impact of proximity on the development of trust and common values; *'if I have got some gem [a good idea] I am not going to pass it on'* (Seren).

Members of LC2 also pay a membership fee each year and the LC committee '*try to keep it as cheap as possible ... so more people can be involved*'. However, as a result of having to pay a membership fee some members have disengaged from the practice of the LC reinforcing Down's (1999) findings that membership fees cannot guarantee participation and can actually limit the success of a community (as referred to above). LC2 findings concur with Morrison et al. (2004), in that if businesses pay a membership fee it is more likely that they will feel '*part of the area*'.

7.2.1.4 The learning communities' periphery

The periphery, as an innovative site where rich ideas are created and resources and new competencies can be gained is compromised by closed LC boundaries and this will impact the evolution of the LC (Brouder and Eriksson, 2013; Lave and Wenger, 1991). The vast majority of tourism businesses that are currently external to LC1 are unaware of the strategy that is driving LC practice. While LC members are eager to engage external members in the tourism development strategy, they must request permission from core members before they can invite external businesses/ other rural tourism development stakeholders to LC meetings; '*I don't know if the higher power [consultants/ RTO4] would be open to [inviting new members to join the LC]. I would have to check in advance*' (Hailey). For Oliveira and Gama (2013) and Wenger (1998), membership must be fluid if a rich learning process is to be supported and an independent LC is to be sustained in the longer term.

In LC2, a number of members have started to contemplate how they can work with the larger tourism activity businesses because in the absence of collaboration amongst members, LC sustainability is undermined as '*there needs to be more [LC] engagement*' for real outcomes to be achieved, as Halme (2001) and Jaouen and Lasch (2015) note. Findings highlight that Brenda's role as boundary spanner (see glossary for definition) in terms of bridging the relationship between (micro firms and larger tourism activity businesses) is vital in this context. While some members have previously tried to work with the larger businesses, the relationship '*never really materialised*' reflecting Lave and

Wenger's (1991) and Jørgensen and Keller's (2008) findings in that a common understanding must be established between members for collaborative practice to occur. Indeed, findings demonstrate that Brenda is now starting to succeed in bridging the gap between these members by encouraging the larger businesses to present to the group on what their business is about, and how they can add value to the LC location; '[The large tourism activity business] *is keen to work with accommodation providers in the [LC location] and members agreed that this move could be very good for the town*' (Meeting minutes). Thus, as LC members negotiate potential business opportunities, shared meaning will develop amongst them which in turn, will assist sustainable learning in practice which confirms Lave and Wenger's (1991) and Reinl and Kelliher's (2014) findings.

LC2 also has a relationship with the LTO and although it is represented at meetings, it is an external entity. The LTO is '*trying to get people to see the benefits from working together*' but they have failed to do this. LC members did not take part in their 'buy local' scheme, and findings demonstrate that they are perceived as being 'surface LC members', only attending meetings for their own benefit; '[The LTO] *was there [at LC meetings] to see what [it] could get ... rather than what [it] could do for the [LC]*' (Alan). Thus, even though the LTO has representation in the LC and is trying to encourage collaboration, LC members feel that the LTO is not involved in LC practice and therefore they do not fit with the ethos of the group. This implies that the relationship between the two may need to be brokered as currently there is a misunderstanding about what the intended motivations are; '*We [LTO] are trying to ... bringing everyone together, which is much easier said than done*' (Gavin). Ideally, in an evolving LC context, by acting in a boundary spanning context the LC broker needs to bridge the gap between the LTO and the LC by encouraging the development of shared goals so that knowledge boundaries can be overcome (Oliveira and Gama, 2013; Timur and Getz, 2008; Valkering et al., 2013), which is crucial element that will support learner autonomy (Wenger, 1998).

7.2.2 Learning community communication

Prior literature demonstrates the importance of communication amongst members and that it is essential for sustained collaboration (Halme, 2001; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Wenger, 1998). Within LC1, channels of communication utilised by the group include meetings amongst the selected tourism stakeholders, emails and LC resources such as meeting minutes and agendas. Findings demonstrate that a didactic approach to communication is currently being employed by the RTO4 and consultants to LC members. This approach does not allow members to actively engage in the negotiation of meaning (Jørgensen and Keller, 2008, Wenger, 1998) and the transfer of information/ knowledge (Heidari et al., 2014), and should be avoided to support sustained learning momentum (Halme, 2001). Morrison et al. (2004) and Kelliher et al. (2009) have identified the negotiation process as the glue that binds a LC together, as relationships will strengthen from sustained interaction in practice. In time, shared meaning will develop amongst members and a common understanding will be reached (Hara, 2009; Jørgensen and Keller, 2008; Lave and Wenger, 1991).

The local mill development is '*going to transform the face of [the LC municipalities] forever*' and the strategy is assisting local tourism businesses and stakeholders in planning for the increased number of visitors to the LC location once the mill is reopened. The strategy also aims to ensure that the brand is '*valued and widely shared*'. Despite this (and as noted in section 7.2.1.4), no formal communication with regard to the development of the tourism strategy has been made to businesses currently external to LC1. However, the micro firms/ other tourism stakeholders have started to contemplate ideas to promote broader engagement once it is made public through an '*education programme*', which is a crucial step for LC sustainability in the longer term (Wenger, 1998). However, without external businesses being given the opportunity to shape practice through the negotiation of meaning (Jørgensen and Keller, 2008; Wenger, 1998), it is unlikely that they will engage in shared practice once the strategy is made public, as a certain degree of involvement is required in the co-creation and development of such resources (Florén and Tell, 2004; Lave and Wenger, 1991).

In LC1, some of the micro firms have started to meet informally with other members in between community meetings to discuss the strategy and potential '*promotional opportunities*' in the future. The danger of this type of communication is that learning can begin to evolve at individual level if it is not incorporated into a community wide learning strategy, ultimately hindering the sustainability of the LC in the longer term (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Wenger, 1998). Therefore, it is important that all LC members recognise the value of two way communications '*for engagement of stakeholders ... as it gives people confidence and ... a good platform to work [together]*' (Emma). As the quote suggests, Emma believes collaboration amongst public and private stakeholders in a LC can potentially lead to the development of rural communities, that is, if conflicting opinions/ interests can be overcome (Saxena, 2005; Timur and Getz, 2008; Valkering et al., 2013). In this context, a learning set offers LC members a space where they can discuss initiatives in practice (Gibb, 2011), thereby strengthening social bonds amongst them (Jämsä et al., 2011) and in turn, encouraging learner autonomy.

LC2 findings demonstrate that the collaborative '*culture of business in the town*' has been weak to date. Gavin notes that micro firm O/Ms can become '*so engrossed in their own business*' that they fail to see the wider benefits of working in collaboration with others, reflecting Kearney et al.'s (2014) findings. Channels of communication utilised by LC2 include meetings, emails, informal conversations and LC resources such as meeting minutes, Facebook page, brochure and website. From observing LC2, communication is ineffective between LC members generally and particularly between sub group D and LC members; '*It's down to communication ... I didn't know they [Brenda and Nicole] were doing that* [giving out tourism leaflets at a local biking event]' (Gareth). An effective communication channel in a LC can enhance the development of shared meaning amongst members if it is democratic (Morrison et al. 2004; Waligo et al., 2013). In this context, if a learning set was adopted in LC2 which supports a collaborative ethos (Nieminen and Lemmetyinen, 2015), it could enhance communication amongst members resulting in knowledge exchange barriers being released (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Gareth explains that he does not '*use Facebook a lot*' and '*[Alan's] place has just now got wifi*'. Therefore, Gareth believes that using Facebook as a communication medium in the

LC is ineffective; '*You can't just say it's on Facebook*'. Thus, as Facebook is used as a communication tool in LC2, inclusive two way communication which is essential for collaboration (Halme, 2001) and for autonomous learning to occur (Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012) is challenged.

7.3 Learning strategies

Findings highlight that the learning strategies adopted in each case are primarily knowledge exchange based, for example, in LC1; *'I only needed to ... be able to give my ideas'* (James) in the learning set. They have an underlying immediate action focus, for example, in LC2; *'we [LC] worked on that and we [LC] managed to change the parking [fee]'* (Brenda). In the absence of an explicit learning focus, LC members may struggle to become autonomous learners and sustain long term independent learning in practice (Marsden et al., 2010, Lave and Wenger, 1991), which is amplified in an action orientated and short-term focused micro firm setting (Devins et al., 2005; Kelliher and Henderson, 2006; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009; Schaper et al., 2005). Regardless of an implicit or explicit learning focus, the learning set and the significant role of the broker can support the development of learner autonomy and these are considered next.

7.3.1 Learning sets

The learning set is utilised in LC1 as a collaborative strategy to initiate more conversation amongst members (Nieminen and Lemmetyinen, 2015). Findings reinforce Gibb's (2011) observation that LC members need to be familiar with other members in the group for effective collaboration and engagement to occur; *'there's no sense of collaboration yet ... I really don't know too many people in the room very well particularly within the businesses'* (Hailey). Although the learning set is primarily action and knowledge exchange focused the researcher observed that the learning set facilitated reflection at individual level in LC1. For example, during interview Hannah (micro firm O/M) recognised the importance of *'networking'* with other local businesses and showing them what her business is about. After reflecting on LC discussions in the learning set Hannah invited local business O/Ms (via the chamber newsletter) to participate in some of the outdoor activities her business offers at a discounted rate so they can learn about her business. As the strategy progressed other members started to realise that LC businesses needed to *'know who's in the room'* and the practice of their business for the strategy to be sustainable in the longer term. As Hailey explains; *'We [LC] [were] doing an [activity] at the last meeting and we [LC] [were] told [by the consultants] to rank the importance for*

tourism of different events and when it came to industry day [held at the racetrack] I put it really low because I didn't know what industry day was'. Thus, the learning set can act as a structure for LC1 members to understand practice and take ownership of their learning as they reflect on LC discussions and take action to solve knowledge deficits (Marsick and Watkins, 2001; Marquardt and Waddill, 2004). However, it is important to note that while learning can occur organically it should not be taken for granted and therefore the role of the broker is important in maintaining the learning momentum in the set (Jämsä et al., 2011; Valkering et al. 2013).

The potential value of learning sets to LC2 practice was contemplated by Una and Daniel (peripheral members) during interview. Una feels intimidated by sharing her ideas with other members as she explains *'you will always think maybe that [your idea is] not quite so good'*. Una suggests that LC practice may be enhanced if members can develop and negotiate LC initiatives together, as opposed to making suggestions on an individual basis; *'breaking up into smaller groups and talking about ideas. I [think] that might help because then you could voice things and ...if there is a few [in the LC] who agree in a small group then it could go to the bigger group'*. If LC2 was to utilise the learning set as a strategy it could potentially assist with the transfer of skills and knowledge amongst members as they begin to discuss their ideas (Florén and Tell, 2004) and ultimately develop shared meaning together as they participate in the practice of tourism development as Lemmetyinen and Go (2009) note.

7.3.1.1 Brokering the learning set

LC1 was split into two learning sets during group discussions, and the consultants chose who sat in each set and what the topics of discussion were. For Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt (2012), this top-down approach adopted by the consultants in brokering the learning set should be avoided as it will hinder the development of self-directed learning because the knowledge exchange process amongst members will be impeded (Heidari et al., 2014). One consultant also joined each group to ensure that ideas negotiated during learning set

discussions were captured and shared with the wider group, which is important with regard to community wide learning (Wenger, 1998).

Findings demonstrate that the composition of the learning sets in LC1 influenced participation in each group, for example some micro firm O/Ms would not comment on certain aspects of the strategy if other members were in their group; *'I used the opportunity of [Joseph] not being at the table to air my opinion that I thought the reporting structure for tourism was our keg [downfall]. I would never have said that if [Joseph] was sitting at the table'* (James). While the learning set facilitates two way communication amongst members according to Halme (2001), the role of the broker in encouraging members to share ideas and knowledge in the set is vital in the pursuit of self-developed leadership (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012) and sustaining independent LC activity.

The above highlights the importance of strengthening cooperation and communication channels between LC members (Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012) if independent learning in practice is to be promoted. In addition, given the consultant dominant structure of LC1 and learning sets, it is evident that some of the micro firms in group two (see p. 180 for composition of learning set groups) could not relate to the topics that were being discussed as *'those things [discussion items] don't matter to me the other topics [in group 1] did'*. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), Man (2007) and Brouder and Eriksson (2013) it is essential for LC members to be able to relate learning to the context it was created in, to effectively contribute to learning set negotiations. Therefore, in considering the learning set structure in LC1, learner autonomy will be impeded as some of the micro firms are unable to connect to the stories of other members in the learning set and think more strategically about their learning needs (Devins et al., 2005; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004). While the value of diverse learning set interaction is noted in the literature with regard to mobilising learning (Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012), the broker must nurture the development of shared meaning and understanding amongst members through an effective negotiation process (Marsden et al., 2010; Waligo et al., 2013) that can overcome diverse motivations and differences in interpretation (Jaouen and Lasch, 2015).

7.3.2 Role of the broker

It is clear from the above that the broker is vital in terms of promoting sustainable LC practice and in particular addressing knowledge deficits and promoting learner autonomy (Garavan et al., 2007; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). These aspects of the broker role are discussed next.

7.3.2.1 Addressing knowledge deficits

External expertise can enhance a LC by filling knowledge gaps when they arise and as this occurs a rich learning dynamic is generated (Halme, 2011; Reinl, 2011) amongst members, which promotes sustainable learning in practice. Brenda, acting in a boundary spanner capacity creates a learning dynamic within LC2 (as noted by Reinl and Kelliher, 2014), inviting national tourism support organisations to speak at LC meetings; *'we [LC] learned a lot'* from a presentation given to the group by Visit Wales with regard to *'how to get the brochures [together]'* (Una). LC2 findings also demonstrate further examples of boundary spanning particularly when Brenda requested more information on how to reduce contactless payment transaction fees for LC members, as this led to the local bank representative inviting *'the Worldpay contact to the next meeting'* (see exhibit 6.7, p. 227). These findings reinforce those of Shaw and Williams (2009), Kelliher et al. (2014) and Wenger (1998) where the boundary spanner is crucial in connecting and assisting micro firms to move learning to and from other communities. In terms of sustaining an independent LC without these external impulses of knowledge, findings suggest that LC2 activity may diminish over time (Kelliher et al., 2014); *'Have ... a guest speaker ... that provides interest ... that will be the hook that will get the people in [attend LC meetings]'* (Gareth). Other forms of reaching out beyond the LC boundary are also evident in LC2 findings. For example, Gavin visited a small village in the west of Ireland to *'learn from [them] and bring it back'*. This visit spurred the development of a package with accommodation providers in the LC location (see section 7.6 for further discussion).

In contrast to LC2, LC1 members must seek permission from the consultants/ RTO4 to share and exchange information with external sources, and as such the micro firms/ other stakeholders have little voice at present. While the consultants conveyed that the strategy must be welcomed by external businesses once made public because one objection to the strategy could lead to a significant delay in its development; findings suggest that the LC may find it difficult to develop shared meaning with external businesses as they were excluded from the strategy in the first instance, a point which Hara and Schwen (2006) and Lave and Wenger (1991) note. The expression from a number of the micro firms that they have '*to get it [the strategy] clear in [their] heads first*' before communicating it to external stakeholders suggests that they need to be given the opportunity to engage in the negotiation of meaning, which is a crucial component of learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), if their understanding of the strategy is to be facilitated. Under the current LC structure the micro firms and LTO/ township members also have clear knowledge deficits, for example; '*I don't know how we [LC] make the case [to get external stakeholders to engage in the strategy]*'. Therefore, given the closed structure of LC1 and the obvious knowledge deficits of the micro firms and LTO/ township members the development of autonomous learning relationships will be challenging (Wenger, 1998).

In LC2, Brenda leverages in-house skills when knowledge gaps need to be filled which has resulted in a boost of motivation to LC members (Florén and Tell; 2004; Kelliher et al., 2014); '*she [Nicole] seems to be very enthusiastic ... which is really good*' (Una). Brenda actively communicated Nicole's value to the LC in terms of her experience in completing funding applications and working with local communities; '*she's [Nicole] got some ideas on perhaps where we might get funding*'. In addition, as the new vice-chair listens to the stories of LC members, gaps in practice can be identified and solutions contemplated and hence learner autonomy is influenced (Kelliher et al., 2009; Lemmetyinen and Go, 2009). This reinforces Lave and Wenger's (1991) observation that 'newcomers' stimulate reflection; '*it was clear from that one [previous funding application] that actually we [LC] were kind of trying to get the wrong sort of grant*' (Brenda), and consequently innovative ideas as their knowledge and expertise combines with that of more established members. Observations confirmed that LC members all agreed that Nicole's knowledge should be utilised and incorporated into future funding applications.

7.3.2.2 Encouraging reflection on learning community practice

Although the consultants are dominant in LC1 and primarily knowledge exchange and action focused; findings highlight that some components of the strategy appeared to promote reflection amongst members in the LC; *‘Have we [consultants] missed any key variables? Are there any [variables] that you [LC members] think need to be clarified or changed?’* (Self-assessment guide). Observations confirm that as a result of these questions for example; *‘How would local businesses/ operators respond to a tourism tax?’* some members started to reflect on the strategy’s development which is vital for higher level learning to be stimulated (Dewey, 1991; Florén and Tell, 2004; Kelliher and Henderson, 2006); *‘An operator mentioned they would not want to tax locals because the locals are the people who keep the businesses running in the winter’* (Meeting minutes). Reflection may have been an unintended consequence of the consultant’s facilitation style as they chose the variables they wanted LC members to focus on in the self-assessment exercise to ensure that they are *‘capturing the most relevant variables for both destination strength and community support and engagement’*.

In LC2, Brenda encourages members to reflect on LC resources (i.e. website, brochure, Facebook page, meeting minutes and funding applications) and negotiate their value at LC level, a trait that ties closely with the learning broker role (Kelliher and Reinl, 2011; Morrison et al., 2004). Findings demonstrate that as members did this, they started to contemplate how the resources could be improved *‘link with events coming not only to the town but the surrounding area ... [and] there is a lot of things that are not online so for example to even find the bus time table ... is pretty difficult’* (Lauren). However, Lauren has not shared these suggestions with other LC2 members as of yet which may signify the dynamics of a newcomer’s status (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Regardless, efforts to share ideas with other members should be encouraged or else they will be of limited value if they are not leveraged and captured by the wider LC (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Valkering et al., 2013).

Table 7.2 provides a summary of LC structure and leadership, communication and learning strategies in each LC and outlines the resultant influence on micro firm learner autonomy.

Table 7.2: Learning Community Impact on Micro Firm Learner Autonomy

	LC structure and leadership	Learner autonomy supported	Learner autonomy impeded
LC1	<p>Mixture of public and private tourism micro firm O/Ms and support stakeholders;</p> <p>Dominant core membership;</p> <p>Strict membership criteria;</p> <p>Dominant leadership style adopted by the consultants/ RTO4 members.</p>	Access to multi-stakeholder knowledge and resources.	<p>Members have no real opportunity to engage in LC negotiations;</p> <p>Closed LC and an absence of fresh ideas/ competencies;</p> <p>Denied or passive learning; Broker must balance support and encourage the development of leadership skills in members.</p>
LC2	<p>Primarily tourism micro firm O/Ms: Occasionally draws on the local/ regional council for resources;</p> <p>Collective core membership dominant;</p> <p>Membership criteria blurred;</p> <p>Democratic leadership style.</p>	<p>Access to multi-stakeholder knowledge and resources;</p> <p>Shared responsibilities promote learner autonomy.</p>	<p>Community level learning and the development of shared meaning amongst LC members, and between sub group D and LC members is constrained;</p> <p>Limited sense of belongingness for learner.</p>
	LC communication	Learner autonomy supported	Learner autonomy impeded
LC1	Didactic communication from consultants/ RTO4.		Dominant core broker with an action focus stifled the negotiation of meaning.
LC2	LC communication channels ineffective.		Core members constrain knowledge and learning exchange between LC members and between the LC and sub group D; Members are unable to access/ understand LC resources.
	Learning strategies	Learner autonomy supported	Learner autonomy impeded
LC1	<p>Learning set – directed knowledge exchange focused;</p> <p>Boundary spanning role absent;</p>		<p>LC members unable to negotiate the strategy on their own terms;</p> <p>Knowledge gaps will impede learner autonomy.</p>

	Broker unintentionally promoting reflection.	Can stimulate higher level learning.	
LC2	<p>The learning set utilised as a structure and a strategy to mobilise learning;</p> <p>Boundary spanning role of the broker;</p> <p>Broker intentionally promoting reflection.</p>	<p>Learning and knowledge exchange barriers are released;</p> <p>External knowledge impulses stimulate a rich learning dynamic;</p> <p>Members started to contemplate resources and how they could be reshaped in practice.</p>	

7.4 Learning community resources

In a LC, resources such as forms, documents, stories or rules emerge as members participate in practice together (as referred to in section 7.2.1.2.1). As members interpret these resources differently conflicts will arise which will need to be negotiated, and as this happens meaning is formed which represents a shared or accepted understanding (Handley et al., 2006; Morrison et al., 2004; Wenger, 1998). In LC1, findings indicate that the strategy is being presented as a *fait accompli*, as the consultants have determined what is going to be discussed at LC meetings without any real opportunity for other members to provide input, which is necessary if members are to become autonomous learners according to the CoP literature (Hara and Schwen, 2006; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). If this continues to be the case the sustainability of LC1 will be challenging as the negotiation of resources amongst members is important for individuals to take ownership of their learning and for an independent LC to be sustained (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014).

To reiterate, LC2 resources include the website, meeting minutes, Facebook and the tourism brochure. Members have various opinions on the value of the group's website to them which led to its meaning being negotiated at community level (as per Halme, 2001; Morrison et al., 2004). Some members feel an affiliation with the LC location from being listed on the LCs website, while others considered it to be an '*obligation*'. After the process of negotiation which was instigated by Brenda, LC2 members started to reflect on how the website could be reshaped in practice, as Wenger et al. (2002) refers to and that in turn, influences learner autonomy, which reinforces the value of the broker in this context (see section 7.3.2.2 above). Aidan's (website coordinator) realisation that he lacks the expertise to improve the website; '*it needs somebody who has got a better vision than I have*' and Alan's acknowledgment that he does not have the required skill or knowledge to use the website effectively; '*it doesn't register with me*' suggests that when members take time to reflect on practice their learning develops (Jones et al., 2010). Further examples illustrating the value of negotiating communal resources at community level is evident in LC2, as findings highlight that members started to take ownership of resources as this occurred; '*different ways of being able to pull up information [on the website] would be*

quite useful' (Dona). While the value of negotiating resources is confirmed in the CoP literature (Hara and Schwen, 2006; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger et al., 2002), in the micro firm setting reflection is often side stepped due to their action focus, which can be detrimental to autonomous learning (Devins et al., 2005; Kelliher and Henderson, 2006; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009).

Observations of LC2 confirm that all members are informed and encouraged to contribute to the websites development; '*ACTION: ALL MEMBERS TO CHECK THEIR DETAILS ON THE WEBSITE BEFORE THE NEXT MEETING*' (Meeting minutes), which is important for sustainable learning in practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). As members engage in the negotiation of resources which store past learning (Halme, 2001) and facilitate '*the translation of actions and understanding*' (Jones et al., 2010: 659) between members, learner autonomy will be enhanced according to Wenger (1998).

The LC's Facebook page is also linked to the website and therefore when one gets updated the other automatically updates. Findings highlight that the Facebook page is utilised by the LC as a communication strategy even though some members have only received wifi recently (as noted in section 7.2.2) and others '*don't know the intricacies of it*'. The minutes are also published on the LC's website. For resources to be effective in enhancing communication amongst LC members they need to be freely accessible to all LC members (Halme, 2001; Waligo et al., 2013), which they are currently not. While sub group D have their own Facebook page, Aidan (core member in the LC) recognises the importance of promoting group A's local events on the LC Facebook page also, as more local and non-local people look at their social media page; '*the [LCs] Facebook page had 8,784 visit[s] in August 2015 and members were asked [by Aidan] to keep submitting their events for addition to the Facebook page which was becoming a useful resource for the local community*' (Meeting minutes). This could potentially lead to the development of relationships between the two groups in the future, thereby acting as a seeding structure (Valkering et al., 2013; Wenger, 1998) but only if a sense of community can be established between the two groups (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

For Florén and Tell (2004) and Lave and Wenger (1991), LC members must be given the opportunity to co-create and be involved in the development of such resources for them to be able to negotiate them and reshape them in practice. Tourism brochures, modified and reused overtime by the LC reflect the evolution of LC2 practice. Tensions can emerge when members are not consulted on their development or where they are not '*involved in their planning*'. The group learned from this, by ensuring that all LC members had an equal opportunity to contribute to the brochures development moving forward; '[everyone having similar sized adverts on the brochure] *was discussed and that was a good idea*' (Daniel).

As individuals will have various interpretations of communal resources (Wenger, 1998), Halme (2001) and Morrison et al. (2004) note that the negotiation of their meaning permits LC relationships to develop; '[the current tourism brochure] *was a real starter for the [LC] getting going*' (Aidan) and the LC to evolve. Numerous LC members noted that the brochure was over-subscribed and a decision was made to firstly offer space to businesses who repeatedly advertised in the brochure. The remaining spaces were offered on a '*first come first serve basis*'. While the cost to advertise in the brochure was kept to a minimum to promote inclusivity, some LC members (for example newcomers) were not offered advertising space in the brochure due to over-subscription. This is likely to constrain their contribution to LC practice according to Wenger (1998) as resources that are socially constructed need to be understood and shared by all members for sustainable collaboration.

Within both LCs, the value of detailed meeting minutes to capture LC knowledge and ensure it does not remain lost to the wider LC is highlighted by members (McAreavey and McDonagh, 2011; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). In LC1, numerous members commented on how nice it was that the consultants/ RTO4 members '*just want your brain*' and that they don't expect members to '*keep notes*' as Sarah (strategy project manager) '*does the transcribing*'. By doing this the consultants/ RTO4 members are promoting passive learning in the LC, as LC members have decided not to take notes even though they have the capabilities to do so. If the broker does not promote a self-reliance culture in the LC and balance support, it is unlikely that members will become autonomous learners in the future (Cope and Watts, 2000; Reinl and Kelliher, 2010: 2014; Wenger, 1998).

In LC2, Dona takes the minutes at meetings and she has introduced action points in an effort to ensure that what is said at meetings gets transferred back into practice, which is important from a micro firm perspective as learners are typically action focused (Devins et al., 2005; Kelliher and Henderson, 2006; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009). This approach taken by Dona will support learner autonomy in the LC as individuals take action, they learn from it and therefore they can take ownership of their learning (Brown and Duguid, 2001; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Taylor and Thorpe, 2004). However, for learning to be sustained, action will need to be balanced with reflection (Cunliffe and Jong, 2005). Gavin believes that Dona's approach to the minutes has been '*pulling things together*' and as a result responsibilities within the group have become clearer. Brenda also referred to the value of taking meeting minutes as they keep less active members (such as the larger tourism organisations) informed of LC discussions. However, these inactive members will find it difficult to participate intelligently in the LC as they fail to understand resources and practice that they do not frequently engage in or construct (Wenger, 1998). As a consequence, it is likely that less active members will be unable to engage in the negotiation of such resources, which is a crucial component of individual learning according to Lave and Wenger (1991).

Table 7.3 outlines the resources in each LC and their influence on micro firm learner autonomy.

Table 7.3: Influence of Resource Negotiation on Learner Autonomy

	LC resources	Learner autonomy supported	Learner autonomy impeded
LC1	The tourism strategy/ meeting minutes.		Micro firms/ LTO and township staff have not been given a 'real' opportunity to negotiate and reshape the strategy.
LC2	LC website/ Facebook page/ tourism brochure/ meeting minutes.	Negotiation of resources encourages reflection and allows members to reshape them in practice; Action points legitimised learner identity and promoted community practice.	

7.5 Participation and identity

The findings from each LC are in line with the extant literature regarding the reasons why micro firms participate in a network environment, they include but are not limited to access to resources, information and marketing (Ahmad, 2005; Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Devins et al., 2005; Down, 1999; Taylor and Thorpe, 2004). Both case findings demonstrate that micro firm O/Ms/ other rural tourism development stakeholders have various motivations and expectations that shape their depth or type of participation (Brouder and Eriksson, 2013) in a LC context. These include the preferred business/ lifestyle motivations of the O/M (Devins et al., 2005; Dewhurst et al., 2007; Getz and Carlsen, 2005; Jaouen and Lasch, 2015; McAreavey and McDonagh, 2011; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003). As micro firms engage in the practice of a tourism LC together, their capacity to participate is limited due to criteria such as power imbalance between core and peripheral members, trust and learning histories (Jørgensen, 2007; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Marshall and Rollins, 2004; Morrison et al., 2004; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). Various forms of participation and identity exist in LCs (Handley et al., 2006; Wenger, 1998) and these are discussed next.

7.5.1 Forms of participation - core and peripheral members

The CoP literature refers to core members as individuals who have acquired the necessary competencies to actively engage in the practice of a social community (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991). As both case findings highlight these members can display traits/ competencies associated with the broker role to varying degrees (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). Peripheral members can be individuals who choose not to engage or are inhibited from navigating to the centre of practice (Jørgensen, 2007; Lave, 2004; Lave and Wenger, 1991), or they demonstrate a preference to operate actively at the periphery of the LC (Wenger, 1998). Gibb (1997) acknowledges the importance of key individuals in an LC for effective leadership, and Oliveria and Gama (2013) refer to the vital role played by peripheral members in sustaining an evolving LC as they assist with distributing and exchanging information with the wider group and provide an outside-in perspective (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Findings from both cases demonstrate that individuals, who are very dominant in their core broker role and have a lot of influence on LC practice, can have a positive but also a negative impact on autonomous learning in practice (also see section 7.5.1.1 below). As participation is voluntary in an evolving LC and members are resource constrained, an influential core broker can ensure that learning/ business opportunities are not missed by other members by being strong in their boundary spanning role. As LC2 findings demonstrate; *'the [LC] ... picked up on it [town twinning event] ... through [Brenda] ... [and] she sort of helped push people [LC members] into it, encouraging them to feel part of it'* (Dona). Numerous LC2 members (including those at the periphery) contend that without the core broker encouraging members to get involved in these external activities *'things would be very different'* in terms of LC sustainability. While LC2 findings highlight that the collective core membership (i.e. the LC committee) is dominant in the group, findings suggest that the structure was not as rigid as in LC1. It is clear from LC1 findings that at this stage of the strategy's development, the consultants/ RTO4 members dominate LC meetings and discussions with little room for other members to influence the structure. For Wenger (1998) individuals must be given the opportunity to get actively involved in the practice of a community and in doing so reshape practice if autonomous learning in practice is to be supported.

Wenger (1998) and Handley et al. (2006) note that not all members will seek to become involved at a deeper level in the practice of a community but they will play a valuable role in its evolution (Florén, 2003) as an active member but not necessarily a core member. An active member is actively involved in practice but they will still align themselves to certain aspects of practice (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014) as time is at a premium in a micro firm setting (Kelliher and Reinl, 2009; Schaper et al., 2005). Variance in types of participation are evident in LC2 as Aidan manages the LCs website (a vital component of the LC) but he explains; *'I sort of leave the rest of it [LC practice] ... I put a lot of time into the website doing the amendments and changes to it'*. Due to the resource constrained environment micro firms operate in and their frustration to get things done, higher level learning opportunities such as idea generation are often side stepped (Florén, 2003; Murphy et al., 2015) by these members. While the tasks in which active members perform are valuable in terms of LC sustainability, these individuals can become over-burdened and this can lead to their disengagement from the wider LC in the longer term; *'I am not going to go around*

for information [to collect information for adverts on the LC website] ... that's what I am having to do at the moment and whoever takes over from me ... will probably feel the same way about it' (Aidan).

Peripheral membership can also be both positive and negative. Passive members will only participate to feel a sense of belonging (Wenger, 1998), they *'don't necessarily put up their hand up to get involved'* (LC1: Emma). In LC2, this form of membership is also evident as Brenda explains that *'a lot of people ... just pay so they are ... on the [LC] list and ... on the website'*. These members do not regularly attend meetings and they explain that they have to *'carry on making a living'*. However, these members do attend *'the best attended meeting'* which is the Annual General Meeting. This is accepted to a degree by core members in LC2 who recognise that *'some people can't get involved in meetings because they are working in the evening or living away from the locality'* (Brenda). In LC2, surface membership is also visible as these individuals help with certain aspects of practice (for example assisting with LC events) from time to time; *'I regard it as an obligation [to attend meetings]'* but do not engage in the negotiation of meaning. As a result, these members will struggle to develop shared meaning which is a fundamental component of learning development (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

From a CoP perspective, learning development occurs as an individual moves from the periphery to the centre of practice (Handley et al., 2006; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). In contrast to this, LC2 findings demonstrate that an individual can remain at the periphery and only be involved in certain aspects of the LC, but they still strongly contribute to practice, which concurs with Kelliher et al's. (2014) findings. For example, Gavin (LTO) is strong at the periphery as a boundary spanner as he has visited other villages and bought back ideas (as noted previously). However, numerous LC2 members perceive Gavin to be a surface member *'[the LTO] is there to see what [they] can get for [themselves] rather than what [they] can do for the community'* (Alan). It is clear that the vast majority of LC2 members do not see the learning value of Gavin's contribution and therefore Brenda as LC broker will need to bridge the disconnect between the LTO and LC members by encouraging negotiation amongst them. Negotiation will be crucial for shared

meaning to develop (Jørgensen and Keller, 2008; Lave and Wenger, 1991) between these members and for the LC to be sustainable in the longer term.

In summary, various forms of core and peripheral participation exist in both LCs and they can be both positive and negative with regard to their influence on learner autonomy and LC sustainability. For example, in LC2, Brenda is strong at the core and at the periphery in terms of bringing in external knowledge and stakeholders to the LC. Peripheral participation can be negative if members decide not to participate or it can be positive as members can remain at the periphery and be a strong boundary spanner.

Findings highlight that core members are perceived by peripheral members as having more influence or authority in each LC with regard to decision making, similar to Timur and Getz's (2008) and Waligo et al.'s (2013) findings. Members can be impeded from getting involved at a deeper level in practice due to core member dominance and resultant elusive roles/responsibilities of peripheral members. After discussing this, local broker influence on participation in each LC is considered.

7.5.1.1 Core member dominance

A dominant core membership in each LC is impacting active and peripheral members and influencing the nature and depth of their involvement in practice (Jørgensen, 2007). As a consequence, the vast majority of LC members marginally participate in each LC (Handley et al., 2006; Wenger, 1998). Florén (2003) describes dominant core members as omniscient in that they impede learner autonomy in the LC as decisions are made without all members having equal opportunity to provide input. This has led to diverse forms of peripherality including passive and surface participation (as referred to above).

In LC1, while Hailey feels that the presence of the consultants at meetings '*is making sure it [strategy] gets done*'; she believes that their presence may actually be impeding her

ability to understand the strategy as *'they [consultants] are asking the questions'*. Hannah also notes that she struggles to understand the strategy and its future development due to the presence of the consultants; *'nothing is getting done ... I don't see a plan'*. Both perspectives are reinforced by Wenger (1998) findings, as he notes that a dominant core structure can obstruct an individual's ability to create meaning and understand the resources of the community. For Dewey (1991) and Cope (2003), in order for LC1 members to experience higher level learning the consultants should take a step back during LC discussions so that members are given the opportunity to reflect, understand and ultimately reshape practice and resources. As LC2 evolved, the researcher observed that active members started to realise the importance of negotiating resources at community level; *'[Dona] can you please put that [website adverts need updating] in [the meeting minutes] so all members will be aware'* (Aidan). This recognition is particularly important in the terms of supporting learner autonomy and LC sustainability (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Wenger, 1998).

In each LC, the overall goals/ focus of the groups are determined by core members without being negotiated at community level. This has resulted in wider participation in practice being hindered in both LCs due to the absence of democratically negotiated goals as Wenger (1998) refers to. For McAreavey and McDonagh (2011) the process of goal setting helps to avoid the pursuit of self-interest and it would be of particular value in both LCs if members were given the opportunity to engage in this process, as both case findings demonstrate that numerous members have *'vested interests'*. By engaging in the goal setting process, shared meaning will begin to develop amongst members through negotiation (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Nieminen and Lemmetyinen, 2015; Phillipson et al., 2004) and as this occurs it is more likely that members will become autonomous learners, as they begin to reshape the practices and resources of the LC (Wenger, 1998). Thus, in LC1, as the broader negotiation of goals does not occur, it is likely that wider LC members will struggle to take ownership of the strategy in the future as they will fail to understand practice (as noted above). In LC2, Gavin questioned whether the LC had an aim or constitution and as a result he refers to the LC as a *'talking shop'*. Gareth is a peripheral member in LC2 and in the absence of goals being negotiated amongst all members, he finds it difficult to understand the LC's purpose; *'they [LC committee] ... need to get their head together and be more succinct on things'*. These findings are reinforced in the

literature which suggests that when members are inhibited from engaging in the goal setting process, it will likely lead to their disengagement from practice (Ahlström-Söderling, 2003; Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001). For Kekale and Vitalia (2003), if a LC is to be sustainable in the longer term it is important that goals are constantly reviewed and reiterated to members because potentially *'people won't turn up [at] the next meeting'* if this is not the case.

Numerous other examples throughout LC2 illustrate core member dominance and its impact on LC participation. Findings demonstrate that some members have decided to remain at the periphery because they feel the group is currently *'insular'*. For example, peripheral members have put forward ideas in the past to central members but they have *'fallen on deaf ears'* and this has resulted in some members becoming even more marginalised in the LC because they feel that their input is just *'dismissed [by core members]'*. While Gareth acknowledges that all members can raise their ideas at LC meetings, he explains that it is questionable *'whether they [core members] take any notice or not'*. If this core dominant structure persists in LC2, it could potentially lead to disengagement from practice as the negotiation of shared meaning amongst members will be constrained (Handley et al., 2006; Marshall and Rollins, 2004; Timur and Getz, 2008; Wenger, 1998), which is critical for independent learning in practice to be sustained (Lave and Wenger, 1991; McAreavey and McDonagh, 2011; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). Case findings demonstrate that open and democratic negotiation amongst members is required for participation and learning to occur (Handley et al., 2006; Marshall and Rollins, 2004; Timur and Getz, 2008; Wenger, 1998).

LC2 findings are in line with Timur and Getz's (2008) and Lave and Wenger's (1991) who note that dominant core members require those at the periphery to gain a certain level of legitimacy for them to become involved at a deeper level in the LC. This was particularly evident in LC2 as Lauren (who is a newcomer and peripheral member in the LC) explains; *'I just think we haven't been here long enough to actually take on any of these roles [in the LC]'*. For Man (2007) and Lave and Wenger (1991) this demonstrates the gradual building of competence which is required to fully participate in a LC and that assistance is required from mature members to develop this. LC2 findings highlight that core members *'often*

resist change for no other reason other than this is the way it has always been done' (Lauren). As Wenger (1998) suggests, this has resulted in LC2 core members failing to acknowledge/ incorporate contributions to practice as these members can be strongly invested in practice (Carlile, 2002). In LC1, dominant core members (consultants and RTO4 members) have stifled the opportunity for relationships and activities to develop at the periphery and as a result learner autonomy will suffer. For example, the CoP literature acknowledges the importance of newcomers to a community, in that as relationships develop and experiences and ideas are shared with established members learning occurs and in turn, autonomous learning in practice is supported (Hara and Schwen, 2006; Wenger, 1998: 2006).

Both case findings illustrate the valuable role of the local rural tourism broker in bridging the gap between LC members and encouraging deeper participation in practice. The local brokers influence on LC participation in each case is considered next.

7.5.2 Local tourism broker influence on participation

Although core members are dominant in both LCs and micro firms are resource constrained; *'We can't always get to the meetings'* (LC2: Lauren) and action focused; *'I guess I want things to move faster'* (LC1: Hannah), it was particularly evident that the contributions made by the local rural tourism champions (Emma in LC1 and Brenda in LC2) are significant in encouraging wider participation in each group; *'When [Emma] asks me to play ball I don't hesitate. She has got great ideas and enthusiasm and belief in this community'* (LC1: Hailey). In LC2, *'[Brenda] has got quite a nice way about her and that sort of encourages people to come again ... the meetings wouldn't function very well [without her]'* (Una). This is partially due to the trustful learning relationships (Florén and Tell, 2004) that have been developed amongst the local tourism champions and rural tourism micro firms/ other stakeholders from engagement in prior practice.

In LC1, Emma is instrumental in brokering the relationship between the consultants/ RTO4 members and the local stakeholders. Conversely, in LC2, Brenda is trying to bridge the

disconnect between the micro firms and large tourism businesses by asking them to present at LC meetings. This activity will build the foundation for relationships to develop as it affords members the opportunity to engage in joint learning, which is an important dimension of LC participation and learner autonomy (Timur and Getz, 2008; Valkering et al., 2013; Waligo et al., 2013).

The CoP literature refers to certain attributes that assist with effectively brokering an independent micro firm LC. The local rural tourism broker must maintain enthusiasm, vision and energy and continue to ensure that other members feel that their participation is valuable to LC practice (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Garavan et al., 2007; Wenger, 1998). While LC1 findings demonstrate that this task is *‘made a bit easier by actually selecting those [tourism businesses] to be part of the group’* (Emma), it can also lead to disengagement in practice if members perceive their contributions are not valued by other members; *‘It’s really the task of keeping the [LC] together’*.

In summary, in the context of maintaining participation, promoting learner autonomy and ultimately sustaining a tourism community, it is important that all members are given the opportunity to negotiate and reshape practice as it evolves (Lemmetyinen and Go, 2009; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003). Table 7.4 outlines the levels of participation in each LC and its impact on micro firm learner autonomy.

7.4 Participation and Identity: Influence on Learner Autonomy

	LC participation and identity	Learner autonomy supported	Learner autonomy impeded
LC1	Dominant core broker role.		Dominant broker dictates LC practice restricting other member's ability to negotiate meaning; Open and democratic negotiation is vital for deeper participation in practice.
LC2	Dominant collective core; Influential core broker; Forms of peripheral participation.	Encourages participation by ensuring learning/ business opportunities are not missed; Some individuals want to navigate to the centre of practice and take ownership of their learning.	Can promote a splintering in LC practice as members are restrained from participating at a deeper level; Some members are passive or surface members who choose to stay at the periphery.

7.6 External relationships

As LC members form relationships with individuals or groups in the external environment they acquire resources, new competencies and skills that all add to a rich learning process, enhancing autonomous learning in practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). For learner autonomy to be supported and for the LC to be sustainable in the longer term membership must be fluid (Fuller-Love and Thomas, 2004; Oliveira and Gama, 2013). In LC2, geographical/ membership boundaries set by the regional council are hindering learner autonomy as members cannot leverage potentially valuable external relationships with tourism/ community stakeholders/ groups in neighbouring villages. Una explains that if she was allowed to join external tourism groups in other neighbouring council districts she could *'learn what they are doing and how they do it, and also link into their businesses'*. However, regardless of the membership rules set out in the groups constitution, findings highlight that the boundary of LC2 is open and any tourism related businesses can join the group; *'We [LC] are happy to take anybody, people in [the neighbouring village] are welcome to join [the LC]'* (Alan). The value of relaxing membership criteria in a LC is that ideas from newcomers can stimulate negotiation and learning evolution (Friedman and Desivilya, 2010; Lave and Wenger, 1991) as the case in LC2.

As referred to in section 7.2.2 above, LC1 members have only started to discuss how broader engagement in the strategy can be achieved. Findings demonstrate that the establishment of relationships with external businesses is likely to be challenging due to community politics; *'It's going to be the movers and shakers of [the LC municipalities] who get together and say ... this is not sounding good'* (Rose: external micro firm O/M), a point Wenger (1998) and Reinl and Kelliher (2014) refer to. When this dynamic is coupled with the vast majority of external stakeholders being unaware of the strategy; *'maybe we [micro firms/ other tourism businesses external to the LC] are not informed [about the strategy] enough in town'* (Olivia: external micro firm O/M), findings highlight that these members will likely require assistance to fully understand the learning and knowledge dynamics within the LC (Wenger, 1998). As Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) note, if individuals are to be capable of effectively engaging in LC practice, support will be

required, and as such Emma's role as a boundary spanner will be vital with regard to the sustainability of LC1.

The value of boundary spanning activities with regard to promoting learner autonomy and LC sustainability has been discussed in section 7.3.2.1 above. While this activity can influence collaborative practice and learner autonomy once new ideas/ experiences are shared with other members (Halme, 2001; Kelliher et al., 2014), it is clear from LC2 findings that LC relationships must be strong if this is to occur. For example, a weak LC relationship between the LTO (an external entity to the LC) and tourism businesses led to the failure of the 'buy local' scheme. A number of micro firm O/Ms feel that the LTO is not objective, independent or inclusive; *'They [LTO] seem to have meetings on their own to organise [biking events] ... and there is only a certain amount ... of people [service providers in the LC location] that are asked every time [to attend the meetings]'* (Una). While Brenda (LC broker) believes that the scheme is a good idea, findings highlight that the relationship between the LTO and the LC needs to be brokered. By brokering this relationship the link between the LTO and the LC will be strengthened according to Jørgensen and Keller (2008), which would also be of immense value in terms of bridging the gap between the larger and smaller tourism businesses. However, the broker's ability to find a common understanding between stakeholders/ communities is crucial for knowledge to be leveraged across boundaries (Valkering et al., 2013) and this will be particularly challenging in LC2 due to community politics and misunderstood motivations. According to Carlile (2002) the broker may find it difficult to conduct their boundary spanning role as individuals can be very invested in core LC practice and are often over-burdened with those activities, especially in a micro firm setting where resources are constrained (Ahlström-Söderling, 2003; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). Nonetheless the value of supporting the negotiation of diverse perspectives and differences leads to the establishment of shared meaning amongst LC members (Lave and Wenger, 1991; McAreavey and McDonagh, 2011; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014) and ultimately the sustainability of an autonomous LC (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Marsden et al., 2010; Waligo et al., 2013).

Findings also demonstrate that Brenda leverages external expertise when competence shortfalls arise in the LC (as noted in section 7.3.2.1). She also encourages members to join

other local tourism/ community groups and national support agencies in the LC area. There was also evidence that some members had valuable relationships with external tourism support organisations at an individual level and these would be of value if shared with other members. Seren notes that she has developed a relationship with the '*Federation of Small Businesses*' as she feels that she has a voice in the problems facing small businesses in Wales by being a member of this group. Ideally, the broker should encourage all members to establish external relationships as they can enhance and stimulate learning (Halme, 2001; Reinl, 2011).

In summary, the value of establishing external relationships to the enticement of learner autonomy has been referred to in the literature (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Reinl and Kelliher, 2011: 2014; Valkering et al., 2013) and reinforced by LC2 findings. The impact of external relationships on learner autonomy in both LCs is tabulated in table 7.5.

7.5: External Relationships Influencing Learner Autonomy

	External relationships	Learner autonomy supported	Learner autonomy impeded
LC1	Closed LC boundary; No/ limited external relationships.		Strict membership criteria; contemplating a more inclusive structure signifies evolution; Learning momentum will stall in the absence of external knowledge impulses.
LC2	Open LC boundary; Boundary spanning role of the broker; LC relationship with LTO.	External knowledge impulses stimulate learning; however, the existence of geographic/ administrative boundary rules/ designations counteract the development of valuable external learning relationships; Knowledge gaps can be filled; Negotiation amongst the LC and LTO must be brokered for shared meaning to develop.	

Prior to refining the evolving LC conceptual model, table 7.6 below summarises key findings discussed in this chapter and their impact on learner autonomy.

Table 7.6 Summary of Discussion Points

Key LC criteria	LC1 - Canada	LC2 - Wales
External catalyst	A shared history and ethos of trust amongst members required for learning to be supported; Facilitator must 'facilitate' as opposed to 'control' LC activities	Power imbalance and community politics must be managed in the absence of a shared history for learning to occur
LC structure and leadership	Rigid with strict selection criteria and specific LC boundaries impeding learner autonomy; Dominant broker with an action focus stifles the LC's learning dynamic	LC engagement is more inclusive with core members democratically elected; Blurred membership criteria and dominant collective core constraining the development of shared meaning- splintering of practice
Communication	Didactic communication methods emanated from the LC core impeding learner autonomy	Communication channels ineffective between LC members and between the LC and sub group D - two way communication hindered
Learning strategies	Knowledge and action focus of learning set impeding learner autonomy but broker can promote reflection unintentionally	Contemplation of learning set value and role of local broker supporting learner autonomy
LC resources	No real opportunity for members to negotiate the strategy and reshape it in practice - strategy presented as <i>a fait accompli</i>	Members started to take ownership of resources as they negotiated their value in practice
Participation and identity	Dominant core brokers restricting peripheral members from taking ownership of practice	While the core broker encouraged participation and supported learning via boundary spanning, a dominant collective core has led to various forms of <u>peripheral participation</u>
External relationships	Strict membership criteria stifling the development of external relationships that can promote learning	The establishment of external relationships encouraged which supports learner autonomy

As table 7.6 demonstrates, a key difference between the cases relates to structure; LC1 is a closed group with strict criteria for membership while LC2 is more inclusive. While a dominant collective core is visible in each LC, they dominate in very different ways and resultant outcomes differ. LC2 findings highlight that an influential broker can be instrumental in supporting learner autonomy by being strong in their boundary spanning role and encouraging reflection on LC practice. Conversely, in LC1, a dominant broker

who curtails members from engaging in practice and the negotiation of meaning will challenge the likelihood of individuals becoming autonomous learners.

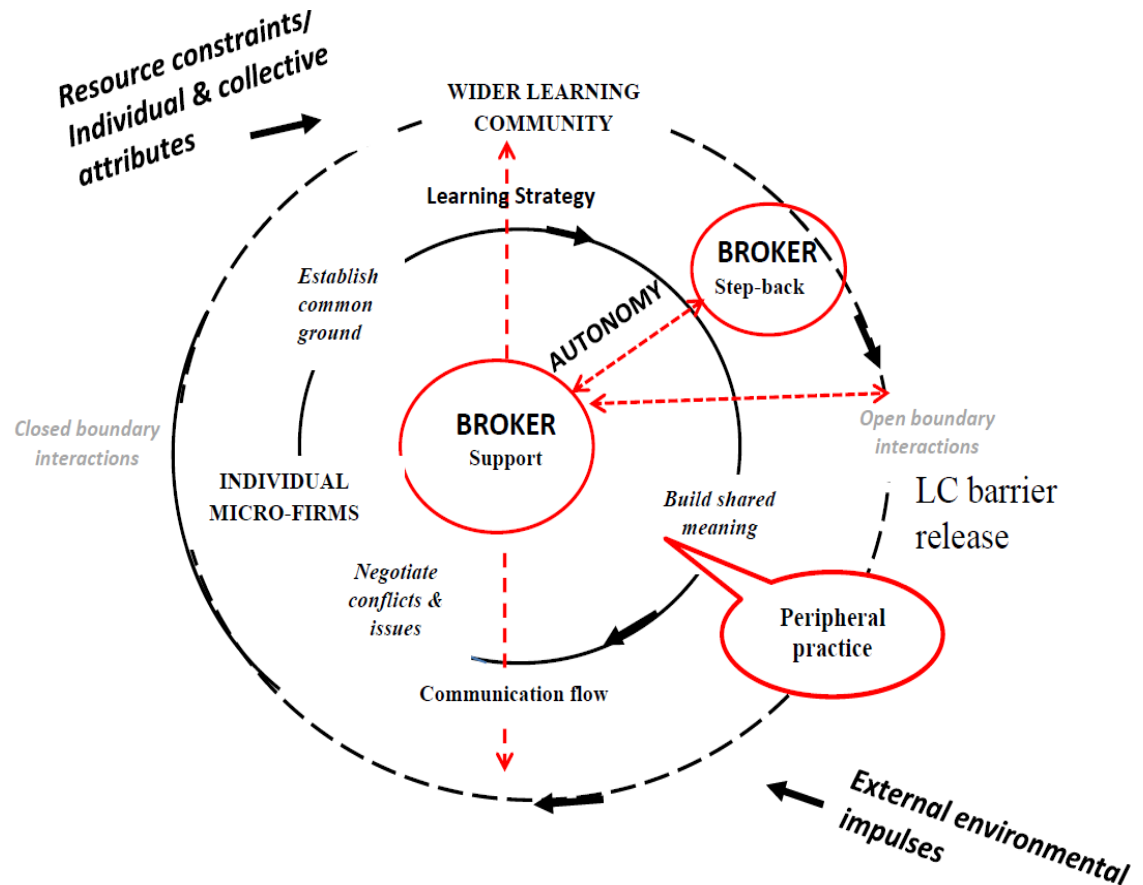
Other differences relate to the availability of and the negotiation of resources. In LC1, members have been given no real opportunity by the consultants to reshape the development of the strategy, while in LC2 members are encouraged by Brenda to engage in the negotiation of resources which resulted in members starting to take ownership of them. In addition, LC1 has a closed LC boundary whereas LC2's boundary is open. In the absence of establishing external relationships it is likely that the learning momentum in LC1 will stall, which will ultimately challenge its sustainability in the long term.

7.7 Refining the evolving learning community model

The key research findings of this thesis (see table 6.9, p. 237) are discussed in this chapter to highlight the elements and relationships that influence learner autonomy in each LC (see table 7.6). These multi-country findings have informed the refinement of the conceptual evolving LC model (see figure 4.1, p. 98). The conceptual model illustrated the unique rural micro firm learning environment and demonstrated that the LC is influenced by a variety of internal and external criteria. The refined model (figure 7.1) illustrates how the catalyst for collaboration, structure and leadership, communication, LC resources, participation and identity and external relationships influence learner autonomy. Key research findings are noted next prior to presenting the refined model.

Key findings that influence learner autonomy relate to:

- The interplay between broker support and broker step back to promote autonomy;
- The crucial role of communication amongst LC members and resultant negotiation of conflict;
- Boundary interactions which promote LC evolution and sustainability.



Based on the case findings there are a number of key changes to the refined model. These are considered next.

7.7.1 Interplay between broker support and broker step back to promote autonomy

In LC1, the dominant presence of the consultants/ RTO4 members is stifling the development of learner autonomy as there is little opportunity for others to contribute to practice. Therefore, it is unlikely that the elements of shared practice (i.e. negotiating conflicts and issues, building shared meaning and establishing common ground) will be

established with the remaining members at the core of practice, and thus the sustainability of the LC will be challenging once the consultants/ RTO4 members step back.

Conversely, LC2 findings highlight that LC management responsibilities should be rotated as the sustainability of the LC will be challenging if this is not the case when the broker steps back. As members assume core roles the development of shared practice is enhanced as they negotiate the requirements associated with such roles, and as they do so shared meaning and a common understanding will develop amongst members. Thus, broader member responsibility will promote the development of learner autonomy.

7.7.2 Crucial role of communication and resultant negotiation of conflict

In both LCs, the value of democratic, open and two way communication is demonstrated in terms of supporting learner autonomy and LC sustainability. While a dominant core broker can be influential as a strong boundary spanner (as per LC2), they can also challenge the likelihood of other members becoming autonomous learners as they obstruct them from actively engaging in the negotiation of meaning (Jørgensen and Keller, 2008, Wenger, 1998), which is a critical binding factor in a LC setting (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Morrison et al., 2004). LC1 members will find it difficult to sustain the LC in the longer term as they have not been given the opportunity to negotiate the strategy on their own terms which is necessary if they are to be able take ownership. A dominant core structure can also lead to diverse forms of core and peripheral membership, which will impact learner autonomy and be amplified in the absence of effective communication amongst members. As a result, divergent relationships amongst members in each LC will need to be brokered if the links between them are to be strengthened. For example, as discussed in section 7.2.1.2.1, LC2 members cannot relate to the practice of sub group D as core members in the sub group have separated the practice of both groups. Figure 7.1 depicts that when this occurs the cornerstones of shared practice (depicted in the second circle) will be absent between the groups resulting in the splintering of practice. This will hamper the development of learner autonomy.

7.7.3 Boundary interactions

As illustrated in figure 7.1, the left hand side of the model depicts the rigid membership structure of LC1. The closed boundary interaction curtails the development of external relationships which will hamper the evolution of the LC (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Valkering et al., 2013). For learner autonomy and LC sustainability to be enticed, the consultants must encourage members to form relationships with individuals/ businesses in the external environment as such relationships will promote a rich learning dynamic amongst members (Brouder and Eriksson, 2013; Halme, 2001; Reinl, 2011). In addition, the likelihood of these external individuals/ businesses engaging in the strategy when it is made public will be enhanced if the boundary is permeable, as the establishment of shared practice will be less challenging. In contrast to LC1, LC2 is much more fluid and this is depicted as open boundary interactions in figure 7.1. The establishment of external relationships accelerates learning in LC2 as barriers to shared practice are more easily overcome. However, the boundary between core and wider LC members in both LCs must be strong if learning and knowledge exchange is to occur and the crucial role of the local tourism champion as a boundary spanner is highlighted in this context.

7.8 Conclusion

Sustaining learning in a LC environment dominated by rural micro firms is likely to be challenging (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003) given the dynamics of how rural micro firms learn independently and together (Marchant and Mottiar, 2010; McAreavey and McDonagh, 2011; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004). There have been numerous studies focusing on the value of networks in the micro firm domain (Chell and Baines, 2000; Florén and Tell, 2004; Fuller-Love and Thomas, 2004; Jaouen and Lasch, 2015; Morrison et al., 2004; von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003), yet there has been limited research focusing on the learning interactions amongst rural tourism micro firms as they learn together in the practice of tourism development (Devins et al., 2005; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009; Komppula, 2014; Meccheri and Pelloni, 2006; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014).

To address this gap, this chapter discussed the multi-country case findings of the two LCs in relation to the literature reviewed, to identify the elements and relationships that influence learning in an evolving LC and subsequently to refine the conceptual evolving LC model based on the multi-country findings and discussion. The interplay between broker support and broker step back, the crucial role of communication and resultant negotiation of conflicts amongst LC members and boundary interactions are identified from the empirical findings as key influences on micro firm learner autonomy. Broker support and broker step back must be balanced and support as opposed to control in this context is vital in terms of promoting learner autonomy and LC sustainability. Open and democratic communication between members is necessary in a LC environment, as it will give stakeholders the opportunity to engage in the negotiation of meaning which will support learner autonomy and LC evolution. Open LC boundaries will engender the learning momentum within the LC as ideas and experiences from external agents will enrich the learning process and prompt a learning dynamic amongst members. In summary, the findings highlight that these three criteria influence micro firm learner autonomy in each case community, however the extent to which they do varies in each case and is primarily influenced by the LC's stage of evolution (Jack et al., 2010; Waligo et al., 2013).

While the elements and relationships that influence learning in an evolving LC environment are identified, their impact on the enticement and preservation of learner autonomy differs in each LC. While both cases demonstrate that the core membership in each LC is dominant, it is clear that LC2 is more fluid which is crucial in terms of sustainable LC evolution (Marsden et al., 2010; Pavlovich, 2003; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). Currently, LC1 members do not have the opportunity to take responsibility in the LC due to the rigid leadership structure employed by the consultants/ RTO4 members. As a result, the micro firms/ LTO and township staff will struggle to develop a sense of ownership of the strategy, which in part is necessary to support learner autonomy and sustain LC practice (Ahlström-Söderling, 2003; Marsden et al., 2010; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014) once the consultants/ RTO4 members fade into the background.

Democratic and open communication between members is the glue that binds a LC together (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Morrison et al., 2004; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). Based on case findings, a certain degree of trust between core and peripheral members needs to be built progressively as LC practice evolves (Ahlström-Söderling, 2003; Florén, 2003; Florén and Tell, 2004; Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012) to ensure communication amongst members remains open and effective, and this can be achieved by carefully brokering divergent stakeholder relationships. The broker must develop an effective communication strategy at the initial stages of LC formation and this will ‘set the scene’ for sustainable tourism and strengthen relationships amongst stakeholders (Waligo et al., 2013). Although the learning set in LC1 facilitates learning at individual level and encourages communication amongst members, findings highlight that the broker must support and not control stakeholder engagement at this initial stage of evolution, as control of LC practice will hinder effective communication between members. LC2 findings demonstrate that in the absence of a community wide learning strategy, unclear lines of communication amongst members will hamper learner autonomy and LC sustainability in the longer term, as members will fail to understand the value of other member’s contributions to practice.

Boundary interactions prompt a rich learning dynamic within LCs when new ideas and competencies from external agents combine with those of members (Brouder and Eriksson,

2013; Halme, 2001; Reinl, 2011). This requires knowledge boundaries to be crossed (Valkering et al., 2013) that can be problematic in a LC environment as members can be invested in practice (Carlile, 2002). As the boundary of LC1 is closed, the development of autonomous learning relationships will be challenging as external sources of knowledge that engender learning have been excluded from the development of the strategy. LC1 findings also indicate that closed LC boundaries will impact broader engagement in the strategy once it is made public. In contrast to LC1, LC2's boundary is open and the value of the broker engaging in strong boundary spanning is evident from the findings. It is clear from the findings that LC relationships must be built over time if knowledge boundaries are to be overcome and brokered effectively. The next chapter outlines the conclusions from this study and recommendations are made in light of the research aim and objectives.

Chapter Eight

Research Conclusions and Recommendations

8.0 Chapter overview

This research sought to explore the elements and relationships that influence learning in an evolving learning community in a micro firm rural tourism context. Having discussed the research findings in the previous chapter, this chapter details the conclusions, recommendations and key contributions to knowledge with regard to the elements and relationships that influence rural tourism micro firm learner autonomy in an evolving LC context.

This chapter highlights the theoretical issues raised in this study. Particular attention is paid to the key factors and experiences raised by learning community (LC) members in each case community with regard to the elements and relationships that influence learning in each context.

The case findings have been conceptualised in the refined evolving LC model (p. 291) and implications for theory and practice are discussed. Finally, research limitations are detailed and avenues for future research are noted.

8.1 Pursuit of thesis aim and objectives

This research study sought *to explore the elements and relationships that influence learning in evolving learning communities in the micro firm rural tourism context.*

In pursuit of the research aim, the primary focus in this multi-country study was the exploration of evolving LCs in the micro firm tourism context, which led to the development of an evolving LC model. This research aim was pursued through four key research objectives (RO1-4):

- 1.To study the elements and relationships that influence learning in a micro firm rural tourism community in Canada and Wales;
- 2.To map the elements and relationships which support or impede learner autonomy within these evolving learning communities;
3. To develop an evolving learning community model for use in rural micro firm tourism communities, based on the multi-country findings;
4. To consider the theory and practice implications of the study.

In the remainder of this chapter the researcher will reflect on the key research findings (see chapter six) from the Canadian (LC1) and Welsh (LC2) case communities and summarise the research outcomes that are discussed in chapter seven in pursuit of the research objectives. In doing this the researcher will acknowledge the secondary sources identified in chapters two to four and specific reference will be made to identified research gaps in the literature.

8.2 Summary of research outcomes

In the pursuit of clearly outlining the contribution made by this study, this section links the literature review (chapters two to four) to the methodology utilised for collecting data (chapter five) and the aspects of fieldwork undertaken in this study (chapters six and seven). This summary will pay particular attention to the research aim and objectives (identified in section 8.1 above). The conceptual framework guided by prior literature reinforces certain findings in this research, while allowing the researcher the flexibility to identify and explore differences between both the literature and case findings; thereby adding to the credibility of this research.

The researcher studied both cases from April 2014 to Autumn 2015:

LC1 (Canada) is young in terms of evolution and was established in early 2015. In this LC, an external catalyst dictated the rules of LC engagement. LC structure and leadership is found to be quite rigid, with strict membership selection criteria and specific LC boundaries creating a visible core membership tempered by elusive peripheral membership. Didactic communication methods emanated from the LC core and a dominant broker with an action focus appeared to stifle the LC learning dynamic. While core members expect the micro firms and other tourism stakeholders to take the leadership baton once the consultants step back, findings demonstrate that they may struggle to do so due to an absence of learner autonomy coupled with clear knowledge deficits, diverse motivations and an absence of shared history amongst members. Thus, it is likely that the sustainability of the LC in the longer term will be challenging.

LC2 (Wales) was established in 2011 and the catalyst also originated from an external source. Although LC engagement is more inclusive with core members democratically elected, perceptions of the LC varied amongst core and peripheral members. Communications between the LC and sub group D proved ineffective and balancing self and community gain proved a challenge, particularly as micro firms feel they have less

influence than larger tourism providers who are also LC members. There is strong evidence of boundary spanning as the LC broker leverages external expertise to fill knowledge gaps as they arise. Of note is the members' sense of 'belonging' through LC participation, although some members lack the competence to take ownership of their learning.

In summary, if the dominant core structure that currently exists in each LC is maintained, it is likely that members will find it difficult to become autonomous learners in the longer term (Jørgensen, 2007; Jørgensen and Keller, 2008; Wenger, 1998). In light of the above, key research findings in relation to the elements and relationships that influence learner autonomy in each case are outlined:

- An external catalyst for collaboration can influence the establishment of trust amongst members and therefore requires careful LC management in the initial stages of formation.

Empirical findings highlight that the LC catalyst in both cases originated from an external source (i.e. funding), thus shared history amongst LC members was absent. This challenged the development of trustful learning relationships initially, which are necessary for sustained collaboration and the promotion of learner autonomy. These findings reinforce the view that it takes time for trustful relationships to develop (Florén and Tell, 2004; Fuller-Love and Thomas, 2004). Findings also demonstrate that when the broker fails to establish a foundation for trust to develop amongst members, the likelihood of individuals becoming autonomous learners will be reduced.

These findings somewhat concur with the CoP literature as it acknowledges that negotiation and the subsequent establishment of shared meaning will be problematic when a shared history is absent amongst members (Thompson, 2005; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002). In this context, findings emphasise that in the initial stages of LC formation, effective LC management is required to alleviate barriers to learning and knowledge exchange. In pursuit of this goal, certain mechanisms can be utilised and these include learning sets and the support of the learning broker (Bessant and

Tsekouras, 2001; Halme, 2001; Jack et al., 2010; Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011; Morrison et al., 2004).

While diverse learning set membership will energise learning amongst members (Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012), LC1 findings suggest that collaboration and engagement in the learning set will be supported if members are familiar with others and their businesses from the offset. When members are able to relate learning to the context it was created in (Brouder and Eriksson, 2013; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Man, 2007), LC1 findings demonstrate that it is more likely that learning set value will be realised. While the role of the broker is particularly valuable in supporting an effective negotiation process amongst members that will help overcome divergent motivations (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014), it is evident from case findings that support as opposed to control of members is required if shared meaning and community wide learning is to be established.

- LC leadership and a strategy for LC practice should be counter-balanced.

While a dominant broker exists in each LC, it is evident that their approach and the resultant outcomes differ in each case. LC1 findings demonstrate that when the broker is overly dominant it can hamper the negotiation of meaning amongst members (Handley et al., 2006), as they are restrained from effectively engaging in LC practice (Jorgensen, 2007; Wenger, 1998). The literature acknowledges that members must be given the opportunity to engage in the negotiation of practice if passive learning is to be avoided (Kelliher and Reinl 2011; Sadler-Smith et al., 2000), and if individuals are to become autonomous learners and sustain independent LC activity (Lave and Wenger, 1991; McAreavey and McDonagh, 2011; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014).

It is evident from LC1 findings that the current leadership approach employed by the consultants/ RTO4 members is likely to result in the micro firms/ LTO and township staff not having the required knowledge and competencies to take over leadership once these agents step back. The consultants/ RTO4 members have failed to sufficiently encourage the development of leadership skills in members and a self-reliance culture

(Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). Therefore phased autonomy is necessary if LC1 practice is to be sustained when these agents leave.

LC2 findings suggest that a dominant broker can also impede the development of a community wide strategy, leading to a lack of coordinated effort by members and a resultant splintering of practice (as illustrated in figure 7.1). While sub group D's activities are valuable, in the absence of seeding structures, negotiation and the subsequent establishment of shared meaning and a joint enterprise between the groups will be difficult (Li et al., 2009; Wenger, 1998), thereby impeding LC sustainability. This reinforces Lave and Wenger's (1991) findings that members outside the core will likely require assistance to fully understand the learning and knowledge dynamics of the sub group when its practice is separated from the LC. The impact of core member dominance and unclear member responsibilities/ roles is highlighted in LC2. Furthermore, members at the LC2 periphery fail to understand the practice of sub group D, as the practices of both groups have been separated by core members.

Based on the research outcomes, it transpires that if LC leadership and a strategy for LC practice are not counter-balanced, it could lead to a number of learner autonomy challenges including denied or passive learning (as per LC1 findings indicate), a falling away of periphery members and/ or the splintering of practice in the longer term if a community wide strategy is not visible to members (as per LC2 findings).

- Diverse learner identities require an effective communication strategy in pursuit of learner development.

While the CoP literature has paid some attention to identities and their influence on practice (Handley et al., 2006; Hara, 2009; Wenger, 1998), little research has focused on learner identities and their impact on learning development. LC2 findings suggest that when individuals are action focused they can fail to see the learning value of other member's contributions to practice, such as those who engage in boundary spanning and bring back ideas to the LC. Remedying this requires an effective communication

strategy that will support awareness of LC roles and activities and in doing so it will contribute to sustainable autonomous learning relationships. The role of the broker in connecting diverse learner identities is pivotal in this context and the broker will need to have the necessary legitimacy to perform this activity (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

- Restrictive or exclusive membership criteria can impede wider LC involvement.

While payment of a membership fee stimulates a sense of belongingness (Morrison et al., 2004) in LC2, findings demonstrate that it can also impede wider engagement in practice if members perceive the cost to be greater than the anticipated benefits they will gain from paying it. Therefore, the broker must regularly reinforce and highlight the wider LC benefits to ensure members are committed to practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

LC1 membership is often guided by strict selection criteria and therefore it is a closed LC environment. LC1 findings demonstrate that the consultants/ RTO4 members have failed to recognise what is required to support wider community involvement, such as allowing members to draw on local and non-local knowledge resources. When membership of a LC is not fluid it is likely that the learning dynamic that occurs within will diminish over time (Marsden et al., 2010; Oliveira and Gama, 2013; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014) due to knowledge redundancy (Halme, 2001; Wenger, 1998) between existing members. LC2 findings demonstrate the value of avoiding strict membership criteria, as newcomers have autonomy to prompt negotiation and hence learning evolution. Notwithstanding the value of a 'manageable' group forming the strategy (as Iles and Yolles (2004) note) initially in LC1, it is clear that supporting a sustainable LC requires wider community involvement.

- Two way communication flows are necessary for effective engagement of stakeholders.

Case findings suggest that a collaborative ethos will only underpin practice if two way communication amongst members is evident, which supports Kelliher et al.'s (2014) findings. LC1 findings demonstrate that when a didactic approach to communication is adopted by the broker, members will be impeded from actively engaging in the negotiation of meaning (Jørgensen and Keller, 2008, Wenger, 1998). Meaning is a fundamental component of community learning and its impediment can result in two way communication flows being constrained. This is also the case in LC2 where online communication tools such as Facebook are ineffective, as they are currently not accessible to all members. LC2 findings suggest that an effective two way communication strategy such as the learning set (Halme, 2001) could help overcome the lack of coordinated effort. The learning set may also curtail the splintering in practice that currently exists in the LC (as noted above). The role of the individual brokering the set in terms of encouraging effective engagement amongst stakeholders is pivotal, as they need to ensure that members understand the value of sharing ideas and knowledge with other members to avoid a locked-in environment.

- A lack of an intentional learning strategy can hamper learner autonomy and LC sustainability.

In the observed facilitated learning environment, the consultants/ RTO4 members currently place LC1 members into working groups to discuss agenda items in greater detail. Findings highlight that there is no intentional learning strategy within the groups. Although learning can occur organically (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001), the support of the broker in promoting learner competencies (for example action/ reflection balance) is required initially. It is through intentional learning strategies that autonomous learning is pursued, resulting in LC sustainability. There has been limited research focusing on intentional learning strategies and their impact on micro firm learner autonomy. Case findings demonstrate that in the absence of an intentional learning strategy, learner competencies can evolve at individual level which can be

detrimental to learner autonomy, if they are not incorporated into a community wide learning strategy.

- Brokering learning set membership and activities requires consideration as the learning community evolves to allow learner autonomy to emerge.

In the initial stages of LC formation, literary findings highlight that the role of the individual brokering the learning set is crucial. These brokers must avoid a top-down approach if independent LC activity is to be activated and sustained (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). It is evident from LC1 findings that the consultants did not pay close enough attention to the structure of the sets in terms of membership and this could be partially due to their action and knowledge exchange focus. Findings demonstrate that some of the micro firms in the groups could not connect to the stories of other members, which is detrimental to the development of learner autonomy (Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). It is also important that the consultants nurture the development of shared meaning and a common understanding amongst members (Marsden et al., 2010; Waligo et al., 2013) in the set to ensure that the sustainability of the LC will be supported in the longer term. As LC1 evolves, findings demonstrate that the consultants will need to take a step back from the groups in order to allow learner autonomy to emerge, as their dominant presence in each set is currently impeding this. In contrast, LC2 members contemplated the value a learning set would bring to LC negotiations if utilised as a strategy to mobilise learning amongst members. The criteria outlined above in terms of effectively brokering a set could help ease learning and knowledge exchange barriers amongst members if employed by the broker at the various stages of LC evolution.

- Members must be given the opportunity to engage in the negotiation of resources as it will entice learner autonomy.

LC1 findings indicate that the consultants/ RTO4 members will need to give the micro firms/ LTO and township staff the opportunity to engage in the negotiation of practice, as it is through this that learning relationships will begin to evolve at community level;

thereby supporting learner autonomy and LC sustainability. LC2 findings emphasise the importance of all members being given the opportunity to negotiate LC resources. As LC members interpret resources differently, conflicts and issues that arise will need to be negotiated. This in turn promotes a learning dynamic amongst members (Morrison et al., 2004). As these activities occur, shared meaning will begin to develop amongst these members (Handley et al., 2006; Wenger, 1998). In LC1, the strategy is being presented as a *fait accompli* by the consultants. Therefore, as members have no real opportunity to negotiate the strategy the likelihood of them becoming autonomous learners is impeded. In contrast, it is evident from LC2 findings that when members are given the opportunity to contemplate resources and reshape them in practice learner autonomy is supported, which concurs with Lave and Wenger's (1991) findings.

- Diverse forms of participation exist in a tourism learning community:

The CoP literature pays little attention to forms of participation that do not involve the movement of an individual from the periphery to the centre of practice. While both case findings demonstrate that a dominant core membership can stifle negotiation and participation (Jørgensen, 2007; Jørgensen and Keller, 2008; Wenger, 1998), LC2 findings suggest that an influential core broker can encourage continued participation in LC practice by being strong in their boundary spanning role. LC2 findings highlight that a dominant core membership and the lack of an effective communication strategy can result in various forms of peripherality that can be both positive and negative in terms of enticing autonomous learning and LC sustainability. Peripheral participation becomes a problem if members decide not to participate in LC practice, but it can also be positive if these members are strong boundary spanners. Thus, members do not need to move to the centre of practice to be classified as participating (Kelliher et al., 2014) and therefore peripheral members will require legitimacy if the learning value of their contributions are to be realised by other members (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

- Local tourism champion influences wider participation in practice as trustful relationships have been stabilised amongst them and other community members from prior experience:

A key finding in this research is the pivotal role of the local tourism champion in brokering the relationships between core and wider LC members, particularly at key evolutionary stages of the LC. Without Emma (LC1) connecting the micro firms with the consultants/ RTO4 members, it is unlikely that the LC will be sustained in the longer term given that a shared history and resultant ethos of trust is absent amongst them. Similarly, in LC2, Brenda has started to bridge the gap between the larger and smaller tourism businesses by trying to establish seeding structures between these members. This is necessary for learning and knowledge exchange to occur (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Valkering et al., 2013). Findings also suggest that if the relationship between the Local Tourism Organisation (LTO) and LC2 was brokered by the local tourism champion, shared meaning could develop amongst these members as the foundations for the negotiation of diverse perspectives and differences are already supported (Lave and Wenger, 1991; McAreavey and McDonagh, 2011; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). The importance of broker rotation becomes apparent in this context because in the absence of local tourism champions the sustainability of both LCs would be challenged.

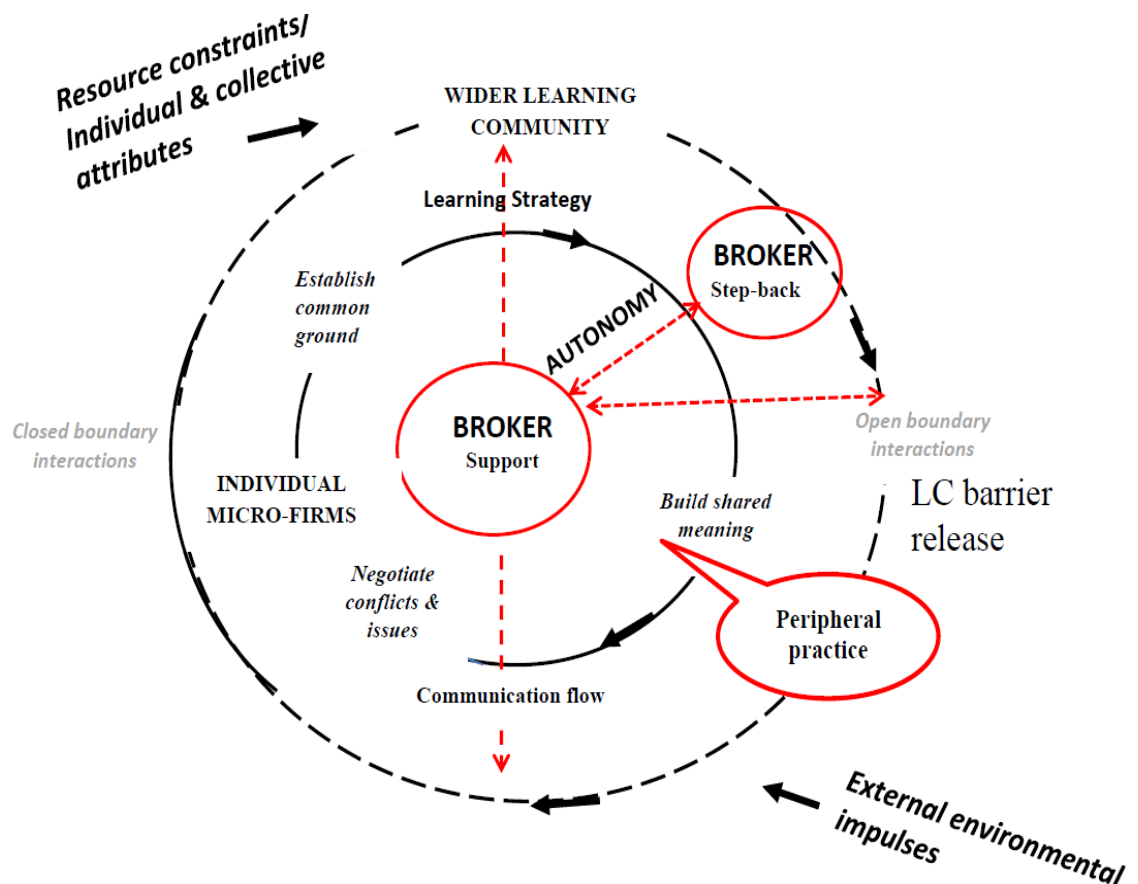
- A closed learning community boundary will stifle learner autonomy and evolution.

Although findings demonstrate that LC1 members are starting to contemplate a more inclusive structure, currently the boundary of the LC is closed (as depicted in figure 7.1). The literature notes that external knowledge impulses stimulate a learning dynamic within the LC and in their absence the learning momentum will stall (Halme, 2001; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). The impact of this is amplified in LC1 as membership is guided by strict selection criteria (as noted above). Findings suggest that LC1 members may also struggle to build relationships with businesses that are currently external to the LC due to community politics and relationship dynamics; a challenge Wenger (1998) and Reinl and Kelliher (2014) refer

to in an independent LC context. In contrast, LC2's boundary is open and members are encouraged by the broker to establish external relationships with other local or neighbouring tourism/ community groups. Findings highlight that when knowledge gaps arise external agents are called upon, which is a crucial component of LC evolution (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Both cases provide rich insights into the elements and relationships that support or impede learner autonomy as a LC evolves over time; thereby facilitating the refinement of the evolving LC model (see figure 7.1; repeated here for ease of reference).

Figure 7.1: Refined Evolving Learning Community Model



Case findings clearly demonstrate that it can be difficult to entice and preserve learner autonomy, and that certain elements are required to support LC evolution. These elements include but are not limited to balancing broker support with a broker step back phase to promote autonomy, supporting the development of relationships with external agents and developing an effective communication strategy that encourages understanding and awareness of other member's roles and activities. In concluding the summary of research outcomes and answering RO 4 the refined evolving LC model is a visual representation of the research outcomes.

8.3 Recommendations

The researcher acknowledges that the following recommendations offer insights into optimised support mechanisms in an evolving LC and are not explicit solutions to challenges in establishing and maintaining an autonomous LC in the longer term:

Inclusive and progressive shaping of learning community practice:

Based on case findings it is recommended that the strategy must be democratically negotiated by all members in the early stages for them to be able to contribute and engage effectively in LC practice. This will assist brokers/ leaders of micro firm LCs to replace control with trust, as it is more likely that the values and goals of the community will be understood by all members, which is important for LC evolution (von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003). When members are not involved in the negotiation of LC goals, findings suggest that in the longer term they will potentially disengage from LC practice. Given the micro firm resource challenges and resource dependencies with other tourism stakeholders, this leadership process should be facilitated at the initial stages of LC establishment with a view to progressive leadership in an independent LC context.

The contemplation of required learning/ level of facilitation as the central broker is replenished is crucial for LC sustainability. This should be done at intermittent periods in recognition of the LC's evolving structure and social relationships. This approach emphasises community goals that can motivate members to engage at a deeper level in practice in pursuit of LC sustainability (Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Kelliher et al., 2009). Encouraging inclusive strategy development through community focused resource and competence building should overcome the pursuit of self-interest. In turn, self and community gain can be balanced through the negotiation of diverse perspectives and opinions. As this strategy embeds in the LC practice, shared meaning will begin to develop amongst members and therefore the likelihood of autonomous learning will be enhanced (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Wider community engagement is important for learning community sustainability:

While a selected working group can be beneficial in terms of being ‘manageable’ initially (as in LC1), it is recommended that brokers/ leaders of evolving LCs must allow members the opportunity to draw on local knowledge resources as the community evolves. Evidence demonstrates that wider community involvement is necessary to sustain a LC in the longer term, as it can help ensure the learning momentum does not stall when the broker takes a step back. Fuller-Love and Thomas (2004) support this finding as they note that all community members must have a voice in the future of rural tourism development for it to be sustainable. Therefore, brokers/ leaders of LCs should embrace the learning value of diverse perspectives and opinions that wider knowledge sources will bring to the group as it evolves, as argued by Marsden et al. (2010). A tourism consultation (such as a workshop) that takes place at key stages of the LCs evolution could help ensure that the wider community are aware of and understand the strategy. This activity offers an opportunity for LC members to share their ideas in relation to the development of the strategy. Through these activities, the wider community would have the opportunity to shape the learning strategy and be integrated into its development, which is important if learner autonomy and LC sustainability is to be supported.

Rotate and differentiate learning community management/ broker specific responsibilities:

Based on case findings there is a clear difference between administrative/ managerial activities and those that promote learner autonomy. For the effective operation of tourism LCs it is important that brokers and policy makers are aware of these differences and that they balance these activities for these communities to be sustainable. Administrative and communicative functions (Marsden et al., 2010; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014) such as a secretary and minute taker are important LC elements contributing to LC sustainability. In addition, the broker must develop and nurture a wider LC strategy that supports collaborative practice and learner autonomy. There is strong evidence in the case findings to suggest that the role of the broker and other members include strong boundary spanning activities as these are crucial to the development of an effective LC strategy. This activity should stimulate a rich learning dynamic within such LCs through the strengthening of social bonds between core and wider members. As LC relationships strengthen, shared meaning and a common understanding will begin to evolve amongst members, thereby

further enhancing learner autonomy. When members cannot or will not engage in boundary spanning (as the case in LC1), Wenger (1998) and Halme (2001) note that the learning momentum that leads to sustainable LCs will be hampered.

Given the importance of the broker role to LC sustainability, it is recommended that the possibility of broker burn out should be minimised. This is particularly evident in both cases as the broker is instrumental in building LC relationships between the diverse tourism stakeholders. Thus, tourism LCs must spread group responsibilities through the promotion of learner autonomy in order to avoid broker burn out. When LC roles are rotated amongst members they will begin to recognise their value and negotiate the requirements associated with them and in doing so learning will occur (Lave and Wenger, 1991), which will support the evolution of the LC over time.

Utilise the learning set as a structure and a strategy to mobilise learning:

Previous research demonstrates the value of the learning set as a structure that enables learning to occur (Devins et al., 2005; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Tell, 2000). Based on LC2 findings this study demonstrates the potential value a learning set could have on an individual's learner autonomy if it was adopted as a learning strategy also. LC2 findings suggest that the learning set could encourage the transfer of knowledge and competencies between members. As this competency evolves, shared meaning will develop as members negotiate practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Based on case findings, for the learning set to be effective as a learning strategy and for learner autonomy to be supported the researcher recommends the following:

- ✓ Careful consideration should be given to the composition of the learning set with regard to an optimum balance. As participation is voluntary in an evolving LC, a broker is crucial in the initial stages of set formation in terms of its effective operation. As the LC evolves, LC1 findings highlight that it is important that the broker takes a step back. In doing so the broker allows members to take the lead in set discussions. This approach allows learning momentum needs to be maintained beyond the life of a single broker's contribution (Reinl and Kelliher, 2010).

Findings support Halme's (2001) observations in that a diverse skill-set is optimal in a set as it can energise learning amongst members. It is important members are not too similar as this can lead to an inward focus, which is particularly challenging in a micro firm context due to the embedded nature of how they learn (Down, 1999; Komppula, 2014). It is equally important that members are not too different as knowledge boundaries can form, which will need to be crossed if learning is to occur.

- ✓ The individual brokering the learning set should avoid engaging in 'expert consultancy'. The broker role is to facilitate discussions and learner competence, acting in a knowledge transfer capacity by sharing relevant knowledge, legitimising the knowledge domains and recounting contributions of internal and external set members. It is important that the broker is seen as a neutral facilitator who is not seen to favour one member's views over another, which would be detrimental to LC competency development.
- ✓ Reflection may not always occur organically and therefore the role of the broker in supporting this activity is important (Jämsä et al., 2011; Valkering et al. 2013). This is particularly important in this study as micro firms are action oriented and short-term focused (Devins et al., 2005; Kelliher and Henderson, 2006; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009; Schaper et al., 2005), perspectives that are detrimental to the development of reflection competency. Reflection requires time if learner autonomy is to be supported (Man, 2007; Murphy et al., 2015) and the learning momentum sustained in the longer term. Findings indicate that this is an important competence that should be understood and passed from broker to broker as the community evolves.

The broker should promote self-directed learning among LC members:

As the collective core of each LC is dominant, the issue of denied or passive learning is aggravated in each case. To help avoid issues of over reliance the broker should encourage the development of learner qualities that protect learner autonomy (Garavan et al., 2007; Lave and Wenger, 1991). The broker must have energy, enthusiasm and vision to promote the development of leadership skills in the LC and encourage members to 'think outside the box' by engaging them in discussions (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Garavan et al., 2007;

Wenger, 1998). As members contemplate ideas in these sessions their learning competence will start to develop. As this occurs it will be more likely that members will be able to take ownership of their learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) once the broker fades into the background, which will be particularly important in the case of LC1. Tourism support groups such as Destination Canada or Visit Wales for example could facilitate events such as workshops that support the development of local tourism champions, in pursuit of broker competency development. Such events/ workshops could focus on the importance of developing a cooperative learning ethos amongst members in the LC and the value of adopting mechanisms that support learning interactions such as benchmarking activities, a view supported by Valkering et al. (2013).

Open transparent and regular communications can help engage inactive members in LC practice:

LCs should have an effective communication strategy incorporating regular contact mechanisms such as sending out detailed meeting minutes to all members, including non-attendees. Meeting minutes represent shared reification (Lave and Wenger, 1991) of LC practice by capturing knowledge and shaping identities at individual and community level. Based on LC2 findings, LC activities such as sending out detailed meeting minutes to all members can help ensure inactive members have an understanding of and are aware of LC practice. Communication tools can facilitate the engagement of inactive members in the negotiation of resources, which is crucial for sustained participation and learning (Handley et al., 2006; Lave and Wenger, 1991). As inactive members begin to see the value of LC practice to rural tourism development through an effective communication strategy, it is more likely that they will engage in practice in the future.

8.4 Contributions to knowledge

This research makes a valuable contribution on numerous levels and these are considered next.

8.4.1 Theoretical contributions of the research

This multi-country research has provided valuable insights into the elements and relationships that influence learning in evolving learning communities. The research is presented in the context of two longitudinal interpretive case studies in tourism practitioner communities in Canada and Wales. From a literary perspective, the research seeks to contribute to the domains of tourism micro firm collaborative activities, rural communities, social learning and community of practice theories and to the emerging literature on evolving LCs. On a theoretical level, this approach has highlighted new areas for description and the extension/ reinforcement of existing theory.

8.4.1.1 New areas for description

This research is unique as it is the first multi-country study of its kind that explores the elements and relationships that influence learning in the micro firm rural tourism context to the best of the researcher's knowledge. Current literature fails to adequately address different forms of micro firm LCs and the challenges they encounter as they evolve independently. For example, little is known about the environment where members have inadequate knowledge and learner competencies to take the leadership baton and drive LC practice after a facilitated catalyst concludes (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). In particular, there is a paucity of research that explores micro firm LCs and their potential influence with regard to assisting rural micro firm O/Ms to sustain an autonomous LC environment in an international context. Further, recent research conducted by Polo and Frías (2010) and Komppula (2014: 361) has called for more academic attention to be paid to '*collaboration between small tourism enterprises in the enhancement of rural destinations*' and what impacts these relationships as the LC evolves. By drawing on Lave and Wenger's (1991)

community of practice perspective, the research contributes to the above gaps in the micro firm and LC literature in a rural tourism context.

The research contribution is made through mapping the elements and relationships which support or impede micro firm learner autonomy and competency development in an evolving LC model for rural micro firm tourism. This is based on relevant literature and the multi-country findings. The resultant evolving LC model may be of value to governments and policy makers who strive to support evolving rural tourism micro firm LCs and the development of sustainable relationships between individual learners within. The model (figure 7.1) depicts the unique rural micro firm LC environment and illustrates that specific learner competencies are required if the leadership baton is to be successfully passed from the facilitator to the local rural tourism champion/ broker. This requires effective leadership that promotes knowledge creation as opposed to consumption, which Valkering et al. (2013) distinguish as ‘learning bottom-up’. The research indicates that broker support needs to be counter-balanced by autonomous learning action, in which open two way communication is promoted and phased autonomy is encouraged through a broker step back phase. The findings also point to the rotation of LC management responsibilities, as members must *‘engage in knowledge-building through learning ... for themselves’* if they are to become autonomous learners (Hara and Schwen, 2006: 97).

8.4.1.2 Extending/ reinforcing existing theory

This multi-country study extends/ reinforces the CoP concept (Handley et al., 2006; Wenger, 1998; Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) by reinforcing the work of others in the micro firm learning domain (Devins et al., 2005; Down, 1999; Gibb and Scott, 2001; Halme, 2001; Meccheri and Pelloni, 2006; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014) and the tourism learning networks literature (Kelliher and Reinl, 2011; Kelliher et al., 2014; Komppula, 2004; Morrison et al., 2004; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Pavlovich, 2003; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007). This research broadens the CoP perspective by contemplating how certain strategies adopted in an independent LC setting support or impede learner autonomy, and in doing so highlighting the challenges in sustaining an

autonomous LC. This research further builds on Kelliher et al's (2014) contribution in relation to the various forms of participation that can exist in a micro firm rural tourism LC. While the CoP literature suggests an individual is not participating if they do not move towards the centre of practice over time, this research indicates that an individual can remain at the periphery of the community and still play a valuable role in its evolution. However, this research suggests that for the learning value of their role and contribution to practice to be realised by others, broker support is required for negotiation to take place. Negotiation is vital for shared meaning to develop between members and ultimately for evolving LC practice to be sustained (Jørgensen and Keller, 2008; Lave and Wenger, 1991).

8.4.2 Practical contributions to knowledge

This research offers insights into how the catalyst, structure and leadership, communication, learning strategies, resources, participation and identity and boundary criteria influence learning in evolving LC's. This research may be of value to academics, governments (at local, regional and national level) and tourism community groups who work with local business O/Ms to develop policies that support economic and rural tourism community development. An interactive education tool may help balance stakeholder self-direction with learner support, which is vital for sustainable LC evolution (Jack et al., 2010; Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Lemmetyinen and Go, 2009; Marsden et al., 2010). A further contribution is that the research provides insight to those practitioners involved in learning and development initiatives in rural tourism micro firm communities. The rural tourism micro firms may also gain from an increased awareness of the elements and relationships inherent in an evolving learning community.

The key informants in each case community (see table 5.3 p. 126) have all expressed interest in the findings from this research. Upon completion, the researcher has agreed to present case findings and recommendations in draft form to case participants (as noted in the researcher terms of reference). In addition, the author has also agreed to draft a

position/ policy paper for submission to the relevant authorities in each domain (Canada and Wales).

In summary, the specific practical implications from this research are:

- An absence of a shared history and ethos of trust amongst LC members may be likely in the early stages of LC establishment. Policy makers need to consider a number of measures where this is the case to strengthen social bonds amongst members and encourage a deeper level of engagement in LC practice. This research indicates that facilitation/ learning support is required to encourage initial collaboration amongst LC members, due to the likely existence of divergent motivations and political tensions that is often associated with rural tourism development, as argued by McAreavey and McDonagh (2011) and Waligo et al. (2013) among others. Regardless of an implicit or explicit learning focus, strategies such as the support of the broker and the adoption of the learning set can help build a level of trust and shared meaning amongst members that is necessary for learning and knowledge exchange barriers to be released amongst them; thereby promoting learner autonomy and LC sustainability. However, for broker support to be effective as the LC evolves, it is important that broker intervention is balanced with group self-direction to support learner autonomy. A broker step back phase is crucial in this context.
- Brokers/ leaders of tourism micro firm LCs must consider succession planning, as this will influence learner autonomy and support the sustainability of the evolving LC in the long term. This research contribution builds on Reinl's (2011) findings. This requires brokers/ leaders to understand the competencies LC members have through conducting a skills audit. Identifying and developing in-house skills can boost a member's motivation to engage in the LC, highlight gaps in practice and stimulate the contemplation of solutions to these gaps amongst members.
- Even in the early stages of LC establishment a didactic approach to leadership and communication should be avoided as this will hinder learner autonomy as passive/ directed learning is promoted. Instead the broker must promote democratic and

open communication within the LC through an effective communication strategy, as all members need to actively engage in the negotiation of meaning to understand practice, other members roles and ultimately for the learning momentum to be sustained. Two way communication and knowledge exchange will promote wider LC involvement and help avoid the splintering of LC practice.

- This research indicates that boundary spanning is crucial to the sustainability of tourism LCs. The local tourism champion's role in connecting core and wider LC members is instrumental to evolving LC sustainability. Therefore, tourism support programmes should nurture their development as a key individual who can bridge the disconnect between diverse stakeholders, as it is likely they will have the required legitimacy to do so. In addition, governments must ensure that local tourism groups are not restricted from joining or linking in with other tourism/ community groups in neighbouring regions as LC members can gain fresh ideas and experiences from external agents/ relationships. Such relationships can potentially stimulate a learning dynamic at individual and community level and assist with sustaining an autonomous LC.

Finally, there is potential for this research to influence the tourism education sector's training and learning strategies in Canada and Wales, and therefore it may be of value to tourism support agencies including LEADER groups, Regional Tourism Organisations (in a Canadian context), Visit Wales and Destination Canada. Policy makers have established that a *one size does not fit all* with regard to rural tourism micro firm LCs as these businesses are heterogenic. When providing support to this sector policy makers need to understand and be aware of what trigger's learning for this cohort and avoid adopting initiatives on an ad-hoc basis. Therefore, for policy to be effective it is important for tourism policy makers to understand the elements and relationships that influence learning by pursuing '*dimensions that reflect the reality as defined by the small tourism businesses themselves*' (Morrison et al., 2010: 746).

The recommendations and implications of this research outlined above could help policy makers preserve and entice learner autonomy and in doing so support the sustainability of tourism LCs. This study was conducted over a period that allowed the researcher to provide rich insights into the elements and relationships that influence learning in a rural tourism micro firm context (as noted previously). The criteria that resulted from the findings of the two case communities are incorporated into the proposed rural micro firm evolving LC model (figure 7.1).

8.4.2.1 Proposed rural tourism micro firm evolving learning community model

The rural tourism micro firm evolving LC model presented in chapter seven (p. 291) has been refined to reflect the influences on the likelihood of LC members becoming autonomous learners. No previous study that the researcher is aware of has mapped the elements and relationships that influence learning in the micro firm rural tourism context.

8.4.2.2 Research approach

The value of utilising a longitudinal approach when studying learning and its influence on learner competency development in the micro firm setting has been previously noted by Kelliher and Reint (2011) and Kearney (2015), among others. This study's research legitimacy is enhanced by the multi-country case perspective gleaned from the Canadian and Welsh case communities. The opportunity to compare and contrast findings across multiple cases has strengthened external validity in this research. The conceptual evolving LC themes and model acted as a baseline to explore learning in each case. In addition, the length of the case studies has added to the richness of this research as a shorter period would not have yielded the complex facets of an evolving LC.

8.4.2.3 Summary

As stated throughout this study there has been limited research focusing on rural micro firms (Devins et al., 2005; Siemens, 2015) particularly as they learn together in the practice of tourism development (Heidari et al., 2014; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Polo and Frías, 2010). While previous research has primarily focused on formal training interventions and their impact on micro firm learning and development (Kelliher and Reinl, 2011; Lesser and Everest, 2001; Morrison et al., 2004), this research provides insight into the evolutionary dynamics of independent LCs and whether they can be sustained after facilitated support ceases or can they exist independently throughout their life. Specifically, this research offers insights into how the catalyst, structure and leadership, learning strategies, communication, resources, participation and identity and boundary criteria support or impede micro firm learner autonomy and influence the evolving LC's learning dynamic. This area of research has been neglected by academics in the past.

8.5 Research limitations

The researcher acknowledges a number of limitations to this doctoral research which include:

- This research has raised issues for further exploration as opposed to providing definite answers with regard to what elements and relationships influence learning in an evolving LC context.
- This research could potentially be replicated in other sectors and countries. However, given the multi-country aspect of this study geographical and funding constraints are duly noted by the researcher.
- The researcher acknowledges that understandings of interpretations will be multifaceted which will have advantages and disadvantages with regard to perspectives i.e. whether interpretations are internal/ external, local or foreign-derived (as noted by Tinsley and Lynch, 2007).
- An interpretive case approach is adopted in this study and therefore findings are generalisable analytically and not statistically. Multi-case analysis adds to the generalisability of this study.
- As observation was a key data collection method in this study it is important to note that it can be difficult to give a neutral account of evolving LC activities as *'any observation is inevitably going to be selective'* (Mason, 2002: 89). As noted in section 5.10, in order to ease this challenge the researcher employed various other research techniques in this study including semi-structured interviews, follow-up interviews, maintaining a reflective diary and other complementary techniques.
- This study focuses on the tourism micro firm sector and therefore there is potential for future research to focus on other sectors and larger firms in an evolving LC context.

- Like all research this study was open to bias. Darke et al. (1998) and Walshman (1995) have noted this limitation in research in the past. However, the researcher utilised a reflective diary throughout this study to keep a record of potential biases and how such biases could be avoided as the research progressed.
- This research focused on each case community at one stage of evolution. For example, LC1 was in the early stages of evolution and therefore future observation will illuminate the sustainability of the group once the strategy is made public and its impact on learner autonomy; thereby revealing rich insights into this area of study.

8.6 Recommendations for future research

As a result of this research the author acknowledges that numerous opportunities for future research have been identified:

- Research in this area could be conducted in other countries across the world to explore the differences and similarities in an evolving rural tourism micro firm LC context. Alternatively, research could be carried out in other regions of Canada and Wales to address the limited research that has been conducted in rural settings, as Siemens (2015) refers to in a Canadian context. The rural micro firm evolving LC model could be used as a basis for multi-country/ region analysis.
- The multi-case approach reveals similarities and differences between LC case sites, suggesting context specific criteria that could be explored in future studies. For example, the ‘broker’ influence of the local tourism champion is highlighted in each case and diverse forms of participation are evident. The role of culture and gender in sustaining LCs is worthy of greater investigation in this context.
- There is potential for future studies to focus on other sectors and company sizes in an autonomous LC context.
- This study recommends that if the learning set is adopted as a learning strategy, greater levels of engagement in LC practice may be supported. Research focusing on adopting the learning set as a strategy and its impact on micro firm learning is limited in a tourism context.
- Further research particularly in the Canadian case would contribute to this area of study. It will be interesting to see if the micro firms/ other tourism stakeholders will be able to take the leadership baton once the consultants/ RTO4 members fade into the background. When this happens further investigation is warranted to explore whether they can take ownership of the strategy and sustain the LC in the longer term. The role of leadership (broker) development in sustaining learning communities is also worthy of greater investigation.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Case study protocol

Activity	Description	Timeline
Research aim and objectives	<p>The research objectives are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.To study the elements and relationships that influence learning in a micro firm rural tourism community in Canada and Wales; 2.To map the elements and relationships which support or impede learner autonomy within these evolving learning communities; 3. To develop an evolving learning community model for use in rural micro firm tourism communities, based on the multi-country findings; 4. To consider the theory and practice implications of the study. <p>The overall research aim of this study is: <i>to explore the elements and relationships that influence learning in evolving learning communities in the micro firm rural tourism context.</i></p>	
Case duration	17 months	April 2014 - September 2015
Key informant	Initial interviews with micro firm O/Ms and the Local Tourism Organisation in each case community to discuss the research study and key literature themes.	Canada: June 2014 Wales: October 2014
Case boundary and selection process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The site: An evolving LC consisting of a majority of rural tourism micro firm O/Ms. • The case: Evolution of learning within the evolving LC. • The unit of analysis: Individual learners (members of the LC). • Context: Rural tourism business environment. 	
Case access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full access negotiated with both case participants. • Initial discussion/ interviews with case participants to establish researcher rapport. 	Canada - May 2014 Wales – September 2014 Canada - June 2014 Wales – October 2014
Research techniques	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Semi-structured interviews with micro firm O/Ms (guided by the interview protocol); 2. Observation of learning events and learning community activities in the two case sites at intermittent intervals i.e. Canada and Wales; 3. Informal conversations/ dialogue to reinforce information from interviews/ observation; 4. Follow up informal conversation via skype; 5. Reflective diary (researcher); 6. Documentary sources; 7. Social media – review of online learning community event updates and comments (primarily Wales). 	
Research instrument	The researcher is the primary instrument in the application of research methods.	
Data management	The NVivo software package was used to manage and store data. This software ensured a complete audit trail of data collected was available.	

Appendix B: Researcher terms of reference

Researcher: David Aylward, Doctoral candidate, Waterford Institute of Technology.

Research aim: To explore the elements and relationships that influence learning in evolving learning communities in the micro firm rural tourism context.

Research method: Observation of activities supported by semi-structured interviews with tourism micro firm owner/managers and other ELC members. These techniques will be further reinforced by informal conversations with tourism micro firm owner/managers during site visits.

Proposed case visits: Two visits to Canada and one/ two visits to Wales (3-4 days each) over a 12 month period (details provided in the case plan).

Report: Case findings will be presented in draft form to case participants in October 2016.

Right to refuse or withdraw: The decision to participate in this study is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* up to the point of data analysis without affecting your relationship with the investigators of this study, Waterford Institute of Technology or the University of Guelph. You have the right not to answer any questions, as well as to withdraw completely from the interview at any point during the process; additionally, you have the right to request that the interviewer not use any of your interview material up to the point of data analysis.

Right to ask questions and report concerns: You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me at XXX. Should you wish to verify my legitimacy or report any concerns relating to this study, please feel free to contact my lead supervisor, XXX.

Confidentiality: Every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality of any identifying information that is obtained in connection with this study. You will be assigned an Identification Code and your name or other identifying factors will not appear in the final thesis or related publications. Audio or video tape recordings will be used for transcription purposes only and destroyed within three years of completion of the research study.

Consent: Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep for your own records.

As agreed, either party can terminate this relationship should the need arise.

Signed: _____ David Aylward

Signed: _____ Case participant Date: _____

Proposed case plan

Initial site visits: Canada - June 2014/ July/ August 2015; Wales - October 2014.

The initial visit will entail semi-structured interviews with tourism micro firm owner/ managers and other ELC members lasting approximately .5 hours in duration. I will outline the research study and guided by the key literature themes I will seek to gain an understanding of how small tourism providers work together and learn from one another in rural communities. I would also like to review any relevant documentation (for example, individual or collective websites, brochures and meeting minutes).

Return visit: Canada – July/ August 2015; Wales - September/ October 2015.

On my return visit I would like to observe an event/ meetings to gain an understanding of the criteria that influence learning in the community over time.

Clarifications from initial interviews may require further discussion and in this instance agreement will be requested with the case participants at a convenient date and time.

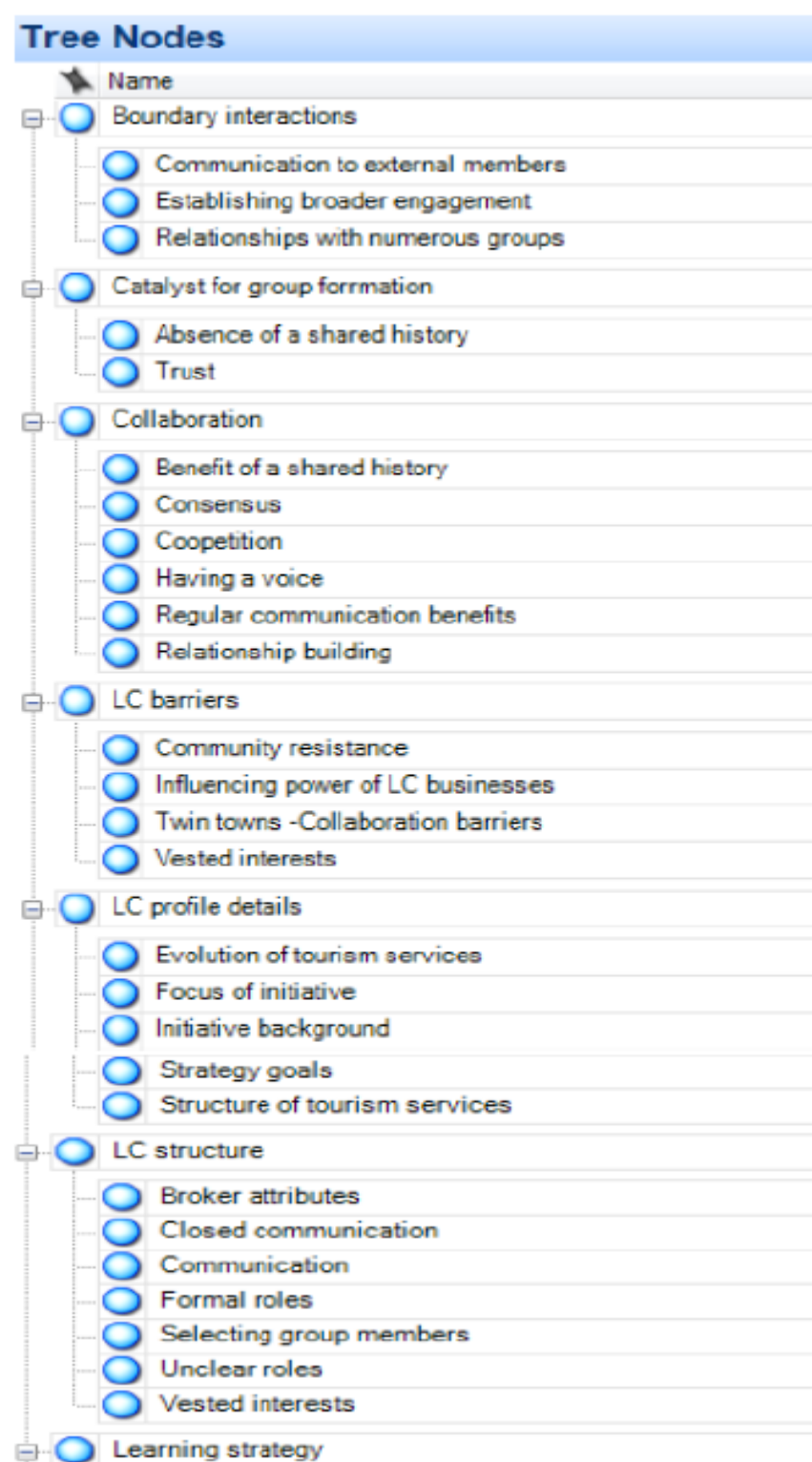
Appendix C: Observation guide

Description	Observer Notes
Depth of Involvement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual motivations-growth versus lifestyle Power and politics Negotiating different interests/ interpretations Knowledge hoarding Balancing cooperation with competition- trust and commitment Balancing economic with social considerations Significance of meeting times 	
Knowledge broker <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitates engagement Enables reflection Enables communication Encourages buy-in, trust, commitment – setting challenges for individuals Establishing vision, common ground Builds shared meaning – reinstating goals Managing conflicts Evidence of boundary spanning activities Broker attributes- effective in brokering a micro firm LC 	
Supporting role <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Broker knowledge guides decision making Evidence of supporting individual learner and competency development Potential for denied or passive learning among LC members if support is too strong 	
Learning relationships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stabilised – evidence of trust and resource exchange Power influence – voice History 	
Learning development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Level of commitment to practice- rely on social learning for expertise development Ability to recognise competence shortfalls within the group Ability to understand requests from others Ability to understand contributions of others 	
Learning strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify learning opportunities/ goals- evidence of setting goals Learning goals constantly reviewed- important as LC is fluid Strategies applied by tourism support organisation- to facilitate peer learning- formal and/ or informal Strategies applied by micro firms Communication strategies – AGMs, meeting minutes 	
Learning membership and identity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal/ political pressure - participation Aware of their own role, knowledge and contribution Aware of others role, knowledge and contribution Criteria for inclusion/ exclusion Impact of participation (marginal, voluntary, full) 	
Learning symbols <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Existence and how members interpret them 	
Learning resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resource constraints Resources applied by tourism support organisation Resources applied by micro firms Artefacts- assist with understanding knowledge/ knowledge transfer 	

▪ Enables communication/ discussion	
External – boundary interaction	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Impact of external relationships on micro firms ▪ Impact of external environ on micro firms ▪ Information transfer among LCs- common understanding ▪ Value- stimulate action – energy ▪ Knowledge deficits ▪ Overcome issues/ conflicts ▪ Degree of knowledge embeddedness in practice 	
Shared histories of learning	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Evidence of a shared history/ past experience- triggering learning ▪ Impact on group decisions ▪ Evidence of group think ▪ Evidence of cascade learning from previous activities 	
Autonomy	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Supporting learning ▪ Impeding learning 	
Expectations of members	
Evidence of a learning catalyst	
Meeting/ learning structure- democratic to allow exchange (space to negotiate), top-down/ bottom-up	
Sustainability – broker rotation	

Appendix D: NVivo research theme development

Canada



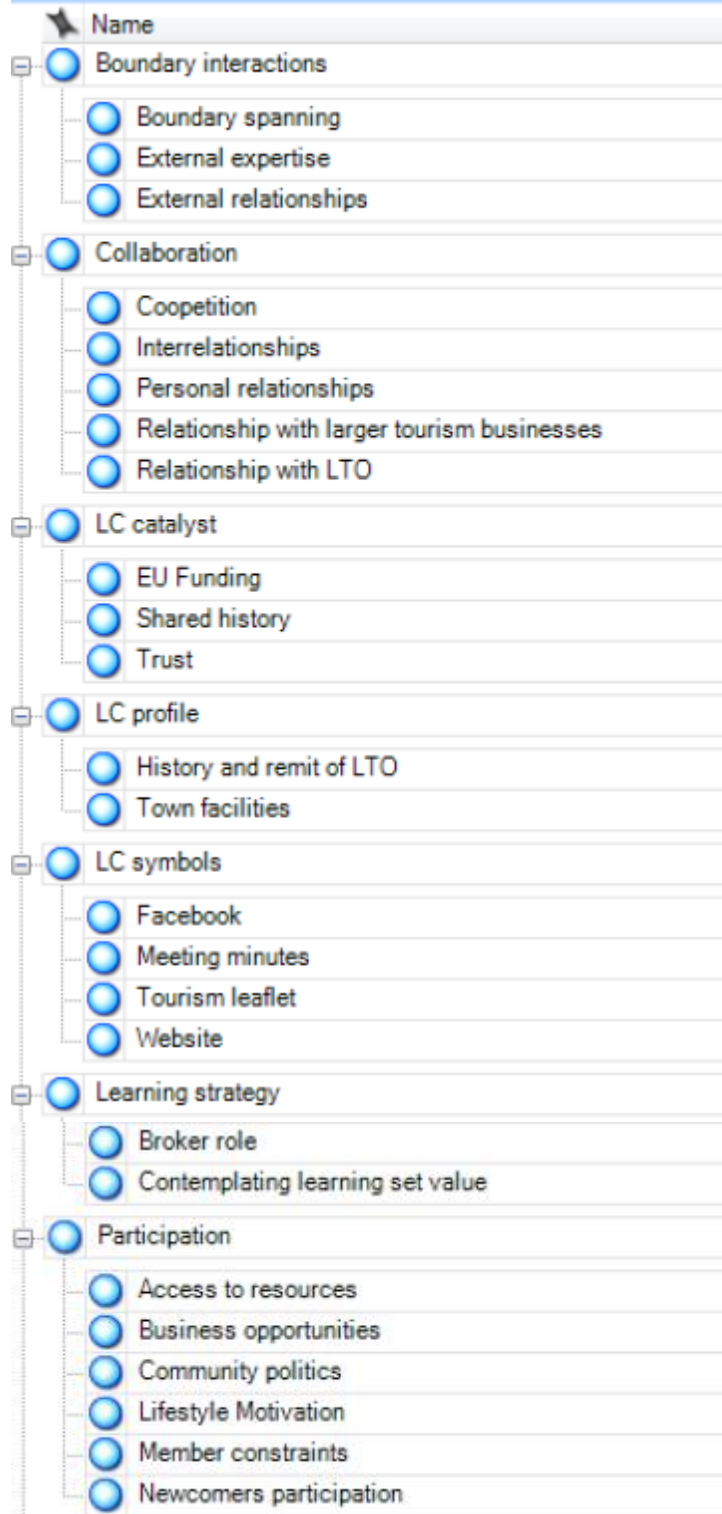


Free Nodes

Name
Evidence of ROI
Expected outcomes of strategy
Growing awareness of importance of tourism
Importance of the river
Learned helplessness
Learner autonomy
RTO4 vision, goal, mission
Tools of understanding
Tourism seasonality











Wales

Tree Nodes



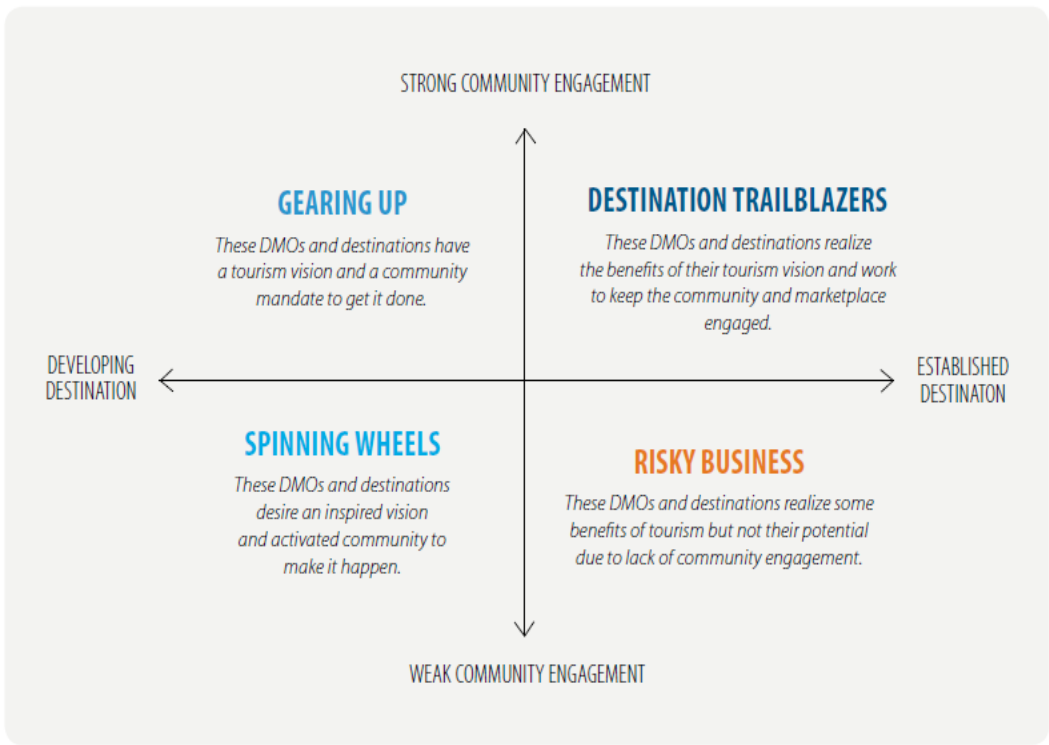
	 Structure
	 Communication
	 Dominant members
	 Membership criteria
	 Responsibilities

Free Nodes

	Name
	Individual learning development
	Negotiation
	Identity
	LC purpose
	Tourism seasonality
	Prior business experience
	Learner autonomy
	Reflecting on practice
	Sustainability

Appendix E: DestinationNEXT: A strategic road map 2014 scenarios

Fig. 2: Scenario Model



Appendix F: Meeting guide workshop number one: Learning community variables

Community Support & Engagement Variables

REAL



Destination Strength Variables

REAL 6



Appendix G: Reflections on using NVivo

The researcher utilised QSR NVivo 10 in the data management and analysis process. The advantages of using a software program such as NVivo in research include:

- Large volumes of data associated with research can be stored, handled, managed and searched efficiently in one location. Source material can be imported, coded and reflected on in NVivo.
- The use of NVivo allows the researcher to focus more on analysis because preparing, organising, and managing data are facilitated.
- Nodes (themes) can be created during the coding process of each data source (i.e. interviews, observations etc.). The researcher can also input comments or observations during this process and this can assist with identifying relationships between the nodes.
- Nodes can be organised in a hierarchical structure (tree node) which permits easy access to nodes. Parent nodes are more general while child nodes are much more specific. Nvivo also allows the researcher to develop free nodes that initially may not have a clear connection with other nodes but as data analysis progresses they can be converted into a tree node.
- As data analysis progressed, the memo function in NVivo allowed the researcher to regularly reflect on interpretations or observations. Memos can focus on particular aspects of a document and be linked to other text in different documents thereby assisting with the development of themes.
- In terms of good practice, as themes emerged and changed over time the importance of maintaining clear node summaries and recording memos on their development was useful in understanding the development of the theme.
- Themes that emerge from the coding process can be systematically confirmed in the data. It is easier to view individual nodes and sub nodes and their importance.

There are also some disadvantages to using NVivo but on consideration the benefits outweigh the negatives. The disadvantages include:

- In-depth training is required to understand the software programme. Even with training the researcher can find it challenging to become proficient in using NVivo.
- Using NVivo is time consuming. It takes time to input data, code it and create nodes.

- When printing the code summary by node report in NVivo 10 some interview quotes do not fully appear on the report. As a result the researcher had to return to NVivo regularly to view the remainder of the quote. This task was very time consuming.