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Jean Lave, Etienne Wenger and communities of practice



Jean Lave, Etienne Wenger and communities of practice. The idea that learning involves a deepening process of participation in a community of practice has gained significant ground in recent years. Communities of practice have also become an important focus within organizational development and have considerable value when thinking about working with groups. In this article we outline the theory and practice of such communities, and examine some of issues and questions for informal educators and those concerned with lifelong learning.

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Many of the ways we have of talking about learning and education are based on the assumption that learning is something that individuals do. Furthermore, we often assume that [learning](#) 'has a beginning and an end; that it is best separated from the rest of our activities; and that it is the result of teaching' (Wenger 1998: 3). But how would things look if we took a different track? Supposing learning is social and comes largely from our experience of participating in daily life? It was this thought that formed the basis of a significant rethinking of learning theory in the late 1980s and early 1990s by two researchers from very different disciplines – Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger. Their model of [situated learning](#) proposed that learning involved a process of engagement in a 'community of practice'.

Jean Lave was (and is) a social anthropologist with a strong interest in social theory, based at the University of California, Berkeley. Much of her work has focused on on the 're-conceiving' of learning, learners, and educational institutions in terms of social practice. When looking closely at everyday activity, she has argued, it is clear that 'learning is ubiquitous in ongoing activity, though often unrecognized as such' (Lave 1993: 5).

Etienne Wenger was a teacher who joined the Institute for Research on Learning, Palo Alto having gained a Ph.D. in artificial intelligence from the University of California at Irvine. (He is now an independent consultant specializing in developing communities of practice within organizations). Their path-breaking analysis, first published in *Situated Learning: Legitimate peripheral participation* (1991) and later augmented in works by Jean Lave (1993) and Etienne Wenger (1999; 2002) set the scene for some significant innovations in practice within organizations and more recently within some schools (see Rogoff *et al* 2001).

Communities of practice

The basic argument made by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger is that communities of practice are everywhere and that we are generally involved in a number of them – whether that is at work, school, home, or in our civic and leisure interests. Etienne Wenger was later to write:

Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope. In a nutshell: Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. (Wenger circa 2007)

In some groups we are core members, in others we are more at the margins.

Being alive as human beings means that we are constantly engaged in the pursuit of enterprises of all kinds, from ensuring our physical survival to seeking the most lofty pleasures. As we define these enterprises and engage in their pursuit together, we interact with each other and with the world and we tune our relations with each other and with the world accordingly. In other words we learn.

Over time, this collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. It makes sense, therefore to call these kinds of communities *communities of practice*. (Wenger 1998: 45)

The characteristics of such communities of practice vary. Some have names, many do not. Some communities of practice are quite formal in organization, others are very fluid and informal. However, members are brought together by joining in common activities and by 'what they have learned through their mutual engagement in these activities' (Wenger 1998). In this respect, a community of practice is different from a community of interest or a geographical community in that it involves a shared practice.

The characteristics of communities of practice

According to Etienne Wenger (c 2007), three elements are crucial in distinguishing a community of practice from other groups and communities:

The domain. A community of practice is something more than a club of friends or a network of connections between people. 'It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people' (*op. cit.*).

The community. 'In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other' (*op. cit.*).

The practice. 'Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction' (*op. cit.*).

Relationships, identity and shared interests and repertoire

A community of practice involves, thus, much more than the technical knowledge or skill associated with undertaking some task. Members are involved in a set of relationships over time (Lave and Wenger 1991: 98) and communities develop around things that matter to people (Wenger 1998). The fact that they are organizing around some particular area of knowledge and activity gives members a sense of joint enterprise and identity. For a community of practice to function it needs to generate and appropriate a shared repertoire of ideas, commitments and memories. It also needs to develop various resources such as tools,

documents, routines, vocabulary and symbols that in some way carry the accumulated knowledge of the community. In other words, it involves practice (see [praxis](#)): ways of doing and approaching things that are shared to some significant extent among members.

The interactions involved, and the ability to undertake larger or more complex activities and projects through cooperation, bind people together and help to facilitate relationship and trust (see the discussion of [community](#) elsewhere on these pages). Communities of practice can be seen as self-organizing systems and have many of the benefits and characteristics of [associational life](#) such as the generation of what [Robert Putnam](#) and others have discussed as [social capital](#).

[Legitimate peripheral participation and situated learning](#)

Rather than looking to learning as the acquisition of certain forms of knowledge, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger have tried to place it in social relationships – situations of co-participation. As William F. Hanks puts it in his introduction to their book: 'Rather than asking what kind of cognitive processes and conceptual structures are involved, they ask what kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place' (1991: 14). It is not so much that learners acquire structures or models to understand the world, but they participate in frameworks that have structure. Learning involves participation in a community of practice. And that participation 'refers not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain

people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities' (Wenger 1999: 4).

Lave and Wenger illustrate their theory by observations of different apprenticeships (Yucatec midwives, Vai and Gola tailors, US Navy quartermasters, meat-cutters, and non-drinking alcoholics in Alcoholics Anonymous). Initially people have to join communities and learn at the periphery. The things they are involved in, the tasks they do may be less key to the community than others.

As they become more competent they become more involved in the main processes of the particular community. They move from legitimate peripheral participation to into 'full participation (Lave and Wenger 1991: 37). Learning is, thus, not seen as the acquisition of knowledge by individuals so much as a process of *social* participation. The nature of the *situation* impacts significantly on the process.

Learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and... the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the socio-cultural practices of a community. "Legitimate peripheral participation" provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artefacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. A person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a socio-cultural practice. This social process, includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills. (Lave and

In this there is a concern with identity, with learning to speak, act and improvise in ways that make sense in the community. What is more, and in contrast with learning as internalization, 'learning as increasing participation in communities of practice concerns the whole person acting in the world' (Lave and Wenger 1991: 49). The focus is on the ways in which learning is 'an evolving, continuously renewed set of relations' (ibid.: 50). In other words, this is a relational view of the person and learning (see the discussion of [selfhood](#)).

Situated learning

This way of approaching learning is something more than simply 'learning by doing' or [experiential learning](#). As Mark Tennant (1997: 73) has pointed out, Jean Lave's and Etienne Wenger's concept of situatedness involves people being full participants in the world and in generating meaning. 'For newcomers', Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991: 108-9) comment, 'the purpose is not to learn *from* talk as a substitute for legitimate peripheral participation; it is to learn *to* talk as a key to legitimate peripheral participation'. This orientation has the definite advantage of drawing attention to the need to understand knowledge and learning in context. However, situated learning depends on two claims:

- It makes no sense to talk of knowledge that is decontextualized, abstract or general.

- New knowledge and learning are properly conceived as being located in communities of practice (Tennant 1997: 77).

Questions can be raised about both of these claims. It may be, with regard to the first claim, for example, that learning can occur that is seemingly unrelated to a particular context or life situation.

Second, there may situations where the community of practice is weak or exhibits power relationships that seriously inhibit entry and participation. There is a risk, as Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger acknowledge, of romanticizing communities of practice. However, there has been a tendency in their earlier work of falling into this trap. 'In their eagerness to debunk testing, formal education and formal accreditation, they do not analyse how their omission [of a range of questions and issues] affects power relations, access, public knowledge and public accountability' (Tennant 1997: 79). Their interest in the forms of learning involved communities of practice shares some common element with [Ivan Illich's](#) advocacy of learning webs and informal education. However, where Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger approached the area through an exploration of local encounters and examples, Ivan Illich started with a macro-analysis of the debilitating effects of institutions such as schooling. In both cases the sweep of their arguments led to an under-appreciation of the uses of more formal structures and institutions for learning. However, this was understandable given the scale of the issues and problems around learning within

professionalized and bureaucratic institutions such as schools their respective analyses revealed.

Learning organizations and learning communities

These ideas have been picked-up most strongly within organizational development circles. The use of the apprenticeship model made for a strong set of connections with important traditions of thinking about training and development within organizations. Perhaps more significantly, the growing interest in 'the learning organization' in the 1990s alerted many of those concerned with organizational development to the significance of informal networks and groupings. Jean Lave's and Etienne Wenger's work around communities of practice offered a useful addition. It allowed proponents to argue that communities of practice needed to be recognized as valuable assets. The model gave those concerned with organizational development a way of thinking about how benefits could accrue to the organization itself, and how value did not necessarily lie primarily with the individual members of a community of practice.

Acknowledging that communities of practice affect performance is important in part because of their potential to overcome the inherent problems of a slow-moving traditional hierarchy in a fast-moving virtual economy. Communities also appear to be an effective way for organizations to handle unstructured problems and to share knowledge outside of the traditional structural boundaries. In addition, the community concept is acknowledged to be a means of developing and maintaining long-term organizational memory. These outcomes are an important, yet often unrecognized, supplement to the value that

individual members of a community obtain in the form of enriched learning and higher motivation to apply what they learn. (Lesser and Storck 2001)

Lesser and Storck go on to argue that the **social capital** resident in communities of practice leads to behavioural change—'change that results in greater knowledge sharing, which in turn positively influences business performance'. Attention to communities of practice could, thus enhance organizational effectiveness and profitability.

For obvious reasons, formal education institutions have been less ready to embrace these ideas. There was a very real sense in which the direction of the analysis undermined their reason for being and many of their practices. However, there have been some significant explorations of how schooling, for example, might accommodate some of the key themes and ideas in Jean Lave's and Etienne Wenger's analysis. In particular, there was significant mileage in exploring how communities of practice emerge within schooling, the process involved and how they might be enhanced. Furthermore, there was also significant possibility in a fuller appreciation of what constitutes practice (as earlier writers such Carr and Kemmis 1986, and Grundy 1987 had already highlighted: see **curriculum** and **praxis**). Perhaps the most helpful of these explorations is that of Barbara Rogoff and her colleagues (2001). They examine the work of an innovative school in Salt Lake City and how teachers, students and parents were able to work together to develop an approach to schooling based around the principle that learning

'occurs through interested participation with other learners'.

Conclusion – issues and implications for educators and animateurs

Jean Lave's and Etienne Wenger's concern here with learning through participation in group/collective life and engagement with the 'daily round' makes their work of particular interest to informal educators and those concerned with working with groups. These are themes that have part of the **informal education** tradition for many years – but the way in which Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger have developed an understanding of the nature of learning within communities of practice, and how knowledge is generated allows educators to think a little differently about the groups, networks and associations with which they are involved. It is worth looking more closely at the processes they have highlighted.

The notion of community of practice and the broader conceptualization of situated learning provides significant pointers for practice. Here I want to highlight three:

Learning is in the relationships between people. As

McDermott (in Murphy 1999:17) puts it:

Learning traditionally gets measured as on the assumption that it is a possession of individuals that can be found inside their heads... [Here] learning is in the relationships between people. Learning is in the conditions that bring people together and organize a point of contact that allows for particular pieces of

information to take on a relevance; without the points of contact, without the system of relevancies, there is not learning, and there is little memory. Learning does not belong to individual persons, but to the various conversations of which they are a part.

Within systems oriented to individual accreditation, and that have lost any significant focus on **relationship** through pressures on them to meet centrally-determined targets, this approach to learning is challenging and profoundly problematic. It highlights just how far the frameworks for schooling, lifelong learning and youth work in states like Britain and Northern Ireland have drifted away from a proper appreciation of what constitutes learning (or indeed society). Educators have a major educational task with policymakers as well as participants in their programmes and activities.

Educators work so that people can become participants in communities of practice. Educators need to explore with people in communities how all may participate to the full. One of the implications for schools, as Barbara Rogoff and her colleagues suggest is that they must prioritize 'instruction that builds on children's interests in a collaborative way'. Such schools need also to be places where 'learning activities are planned by children as well as adults, and where parents and teachers not only foster children's learning but also learn from their own involvement with children' (2001: 3). Their example in this area have particular force as they are derived from actual school practice.

A further, key, element is the need to extend [associational life](#) within schools and other institutions. Here there is a strong link here with long-standing concerns among informal educators around [community](#) and participation and for the significance of the [group](#) (for schooling see the discussion of [informal education and schooling](#); for youth work see [young people and association](#); and for communities see [community participation](#)).

There is an intimate connection between knowledge and activity. Learning is part of daily living as [Eduard Lindeman](#) argued many years ago. Problem solving and learning from experience are central processes (although, as we have seen, situated learning is not the same as 'learning by doing' – see Tennant 1997: 73). Educators need to reflect on their understanding of what constitutes [knowledge](#) and [practice](#). Perhaps one of the most important things to grasp here is the extent to which education involves informed and committed action.

These are fascinating areas for exploration and, to some significant extent, take informal educators in a completely different direction to the dominant pressure towards accreditation and formalization.

[Further reading](#)

Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) *Situated Learning. Legitimate peripheral participation*, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press. 138 pages. Pathbreaking book that first developed the idea that learning 'is a process of

participation in communities of practice, participation that is at first legitimately peripheral but that increases gradually in engagement and complexity'.

Rogoff, B., Turkonis, C. G. and Bartlett, L. (eds.) (2001) *Learning Together: Children and Adults in a School Community*, New York: Oxford University Press. 250 + x pages. Arising out of the collaboration of Barbara Rogoff (who had worked with Jean Lave) with two teachers at an innovative school in Salt Lake City, this book explores how they were able to develop an approach to schooling based around the principle that learning 'occurs through interested participation with other learners'.

Etienne Wenger (1999) *Communities of Practice. Learning, meaning and identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 318 + xv pages. Extended discussion of the concept of community of practice and how it might be approached within organizational development and education.

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Links

[Etienne Wenger's homepage](#): has some material on communities of practice.

[Communities of Practice discussion group](#): maintained by John Smith at Yahoo.

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