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Within and Beyond Communities of Practice: Making Sense of Learning Through Participation, Identity and Practice

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Abstract

Situated learning theory offers a radical critique of cognitivist theories of learning, emphasizing the relational aspects of learning within communities of practice in contrast to the individualist assumptions of conventional theories. However, although many researchers have embraced the theoretical strength of situated learning theory, conceptual issues remain undeveloped in the literature. Roberts, for example, argues in this issue that the notion of ‘communities of practice’ – a core concept in situated learning theory – is itself problematic. To complement her discussion, this paper explores the communities of practice concept from several perspectives. Firstly, we consider the perspective of the individual learner, and examine the processes which constitute ‘situated learning’. Secondly, we consider the broader socio-cultural context in which communities of practice are embedded. We argue that the cultural richness of this broader context generates a fluidity and heterogeneity within and beyond communities. Finally, we argue that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish conceptually between the terms ‘participation’ and ‘practice’ because of occasional duplication of meaning. We propose, instead, a refinement of the definition to allow for greater conceptual clarity.

INTRODUCTION

Situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991) offers a radical critique of cognitivist theories of learning. In particular, it questions the pedagogic assumption that classroom-based ‘learning’ (as a discrete and decontextualized activity) is as effective as learning within the communities in which what is ‘practiced’ is learnt and vice versa. The cognitivist idealization of the classroom is founded on a positivist assessment of abstract knowledge: that such knowledge is valuable because it reflects an objective reality and can be manipulated using rationalist and symbolic logic (see Gardner, 1987). Situated learning theory, however, argues that the cognitivist focus on abstract knowledge is misleading because it overlooks the largely tacit dimension of workplace (and other) practice. Instead, the suggestion is that individual learning should be thought of as emergent, involving opportunities to *participate* in the *practices* of the community as well as the development of an *identity* which provides a sense of belonging and commitment. Knowledge is not primarily abstract and symbolic, but is provisional, mediated and socially-constructed (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Blackler, 1995).

Situated learning theory positions the ‘community of practice’ as the context in which an individual develops the practices (including values, norms and relationships) and identities appropriate to that community. However, in contrast to theories of socialization (e.g. Vygotsky, 1978) which predict the smooth reproduction of communities over time, situated learning theory calls attention to the possibilities for variation and even intra-community conflict. Individuals bring to a community a personal history of involvement with workplace, social and familial groups whose norms may complement or conflict with one other. These conflicts need to be negotiated and reconciled at least in part if the individual is to achieve a coherent sense of self. An analysis of (individual) situated learning and knowledge transfer (across communities) thus requires not only a conceptualization of ‘community of practice’, but also an understanding of what happens within and beyond such communities.

To contribute to these questions and debates, this paper explores the ‘community of practice’ concept from several perspectives. Firstly, we consider the perspective of the individual learner, and examine the processes which constitute situated learning. Secondly, we consider the broader socio-cultural context in which communities of practice are embedded. We argue that the cultural richness of this broader context generates a fluidity and heterogeneity within communities which belies the idealization of communities as cohesive, homogenous ‘social objects’ (see also Clark, 2004; Swan et al., 2002). Finally, we return to our discussion of the components of situated learning theory, and consider the usage of the terms ‘participation’ and ‘practice’ in the communities of practice literature. We argue that these terms are ambiguous because of important overlaps in meaning, and we suggest possibilities for redefinition in order to improve conceptual clarity.

SITUATED LEARNING WITHIN A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE: KEY CONCEPTS AND PROCESSES

The turn to situated and relational theories of learning in the late 1980s represented a major shift in our understanding of learning and knowledge. It followed the failure of cognitive science to demonstrate that ‘learning’ was an accumulation of symbolic representations which could be replicated using artificial intelligence and taught using intelligent tutoring systems (Sleeman and Brown, 1982; Wenger, 1987). The demise of the ‘strong AI’ project (Gardner, 1987; Searle, 1980) was evident, for example, in the failure to create a computer program that could interpret (and not only ‘read’) newspaper articles. It became apparent that *context* is vital to understanding, learning and practice, and that knowledge is not just ‘acquired’ in a mechanical way (Resnick, 1987; Sfard, 1998). At the same time that the cognitive science community came to realize the importance of context, anthropologists presented research which supported that insight (e.g. Lave, 1988). Indeed, *Situated Learning* (Lave and Wenger, 1991) was an output from collaboration between these communities.

In contrast to the cognitivist, abstract conception of learning, *Situated Learning* emphasized the socio-cultural dynamic. Learning is described as an ‘integral and inseparable aspect of social practice’ which involves the construction of identity (ibid, p. 53) through changing forms of participation in communities of practice. Here we see the core processes of participation, identity-construction and practice which occur within (and across) communities of practice. These core concepts and processes are discussed next.

Participation

Participation is depicted as central to situated learning since it is *through* participation that identity and practices develop. As Wenger has suggested, 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, 1998, p. 4; emphasis in original). Thus, participation is not just a physical action or event (see also Clancey, 1995); it involves both action (‘taking part’) as well as connection (Wenger, 1998, p. 55). Participation brings the ‘possibility of mutual recognition’ and the ability to negotiate meaning, but does not necessarily entail equality or respect (ibid, p. 56) or even collaboration. An example here would be the socialization of medical students, as illustrated in Becker’s ethnography *Boys in White* (1961).

The possibility of conflict reflects a recent interpretation of situated learning theory. By contrast, the earlier work of Lave and Wenger (1991) implied that ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ in a community inevitably leads to full socialization, thus resembling earlier socialization theories following Vygotsky (1978). One reason for the apparent ‘socialization bias’ is that *Situated Learning* (Lave and Wenger, 1991) presented what one might call an apprenticeship model of learning in which ‘novices’ initially

participated in their community at the periphery, were then allowed limited participation as they adopted the practices of other practitioners, and finally became 'masters' enjoying full participation. In recent years, however, Lave (2004) and others have challenged the strict dichotomy between 'periphery' and 'core/full' by proposing that participation may involve learning trajectories which do not lead to an idealized 'full' participation. Wenger (1998) has also raised questions about the initial portrayal of situated learning, suggesting that there may be a number of forms of participation, including 'marginal'. This point is especially important since, as we discuss later, not everyone aspires to (or can achieve) full participation.

To some extent what is at issue here are the dynamics of power (Huzzard, 2004). We are not so much concerned here with relations of power in which the community is embedded, such as capitalist employment relations, but with those *within* the community (cf. Contu and Willmott, 2003). It is here that full participation may be denied to novices by powerful practitioners, as was the case within the meatcutter community described in *Situated Learning*. Constraints on newcomers may be strongest if the latter threaten to 'transform' the knowledge and practices of the extant community, since that knowledge is important or 'at stake' to the full participants who have invested in it (Carlile, 2004). Thus, the dynamics between identity-development and forms of participation are critical to the ways in which individuals internalize, challenge or reject the existing practices of their community.

Identity

Situated learning theory brings a renewed or alternative focus on issues of identity. Learning is not simply about developing one's knowledge and practice, it also involves a process of understanding who we are and in which communities of practice we belong and are accepted. Within the situated learning literature, there is surprisingly little explicit reference to theories of identity-construction, although the concept of identity implicitly rests on a critical reading of social identity theory (see Knights and Willmott, 1985). Nevertheless, early interpretations of *Situated Learning* have tended to neglect the effects of broader social and power relations (Contu and Willmott, 2003).

In more critical perspectives on identity, the notion of a 'project of the self' goes some way to explaining how the nature of individuals' participation (for example, in a workplace community) influences their understanding of 'self' (Grey, 1994). Alvesson and Willmott (2002) for example, emphasize two main processes of identity construction: identity-regulation and identity-work. The first process refers to regulation originating from or mediated through the organization (e.g. recruitment, induction and promotion policies) as well as employees' individual responses such as enactment and/or resistance. The second process of 'identity-work' refers to employees' continuous efforts to form, repair, maintain or revise their perceptions of self. This identity-work involves a negotiation between the organization's

efforts at identity-regulation (which the employee may or may not internalize) and the employees' sense of self derived from current work as well as other (work and non-work) identities. Through these processes, individuals come to embrace or reject opportunities to participate more fully in their community of practice, depending on the 'fit' or resonance of those opportunities with their current senses of self. We return to the topic of identity-conflict later in the paper.

Practice

The term 'practice' is rich in meaning and at times ambiguous (Knorr Cetina, 1999). In an attempt at definition, Brown and Duguid (2001, p. 203) assert that 'by practice we mean, as most theorists of practice mean, undertaking or engaging fully in a task, job or profession'. In this context, practice is always *social* practice (Wenger, 1998, p. 47), and is about 'doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do' (ibid). By participating in a community, a newcomer develops an awareness of that community's practice and thus comes to understand and engage with (or adapt and transform) various tools, language, role-definitions and other explicit artefacts as well as various implicit relations, tacit conventions, and underlying assumptions and values. Ibarra (1999) for example, has shown how individuals develop practices by observing others, imitating them, and then adapting and developing their own particular practices in ways which match not only the wider community's norms, but also their own individual sense of integrity and self. Ibarra calls this process 'experimenting with provisional selves' (1999). Thus, it is through participation in communities that individuals develop and possibly adapt and thereby reconstruct their identities and practice (see also Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Breakwell, 1993, 2001).

The development of practice and identity through participation in communities of practice is illustrated in Figure 1. Here, multiple communities are represented to illustrate the point that individuals are likely to participate in (or, historically, have participated in) more than one community, a point we discuss next.

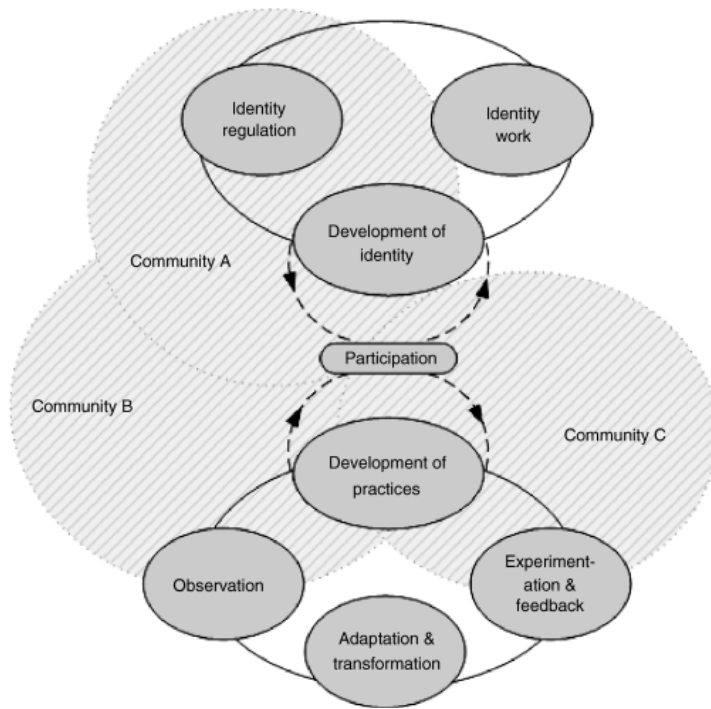


Figure 1: Conceptual framework representing individual learning (development of identity and practices) through participation in the context of communities of practice

SITUATED LEARNING WITHIN MULTIPLE COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: POTENTIAL FOR CONFLICT AND TENSIONS?

Having outlined and developed the constructs of participation, identity and practice and the related processes which constitute situated learning, we now return to the context in which that learning occurs. In particular, we consider the broader socio-cultural context in which communities of practice are embedded. We will argue that the cultural richness or multiplicity of this broader context generates a fluidity and heterogeneity within communities which belies an assumption in the literature that communities of practice are homogenous ‘social objects’ (see also Dyck et al., 2005; Swan et al., 2002).

Firstly, some clarification is required. As indicated earlier, the phrase ‘community of practice’ is somewhat ambiguous, and the related literature is ‘still evolving’ and ‘hardly coherent’ (Lindkvist, 2005, p. 1191). Considerable variation exists around how communities of practice are described and characterized. Lindkvist (ibid, p. 1189), for example, describes them as tightly knit groups ‘that have been practising together long enough to develop into a cohesive community with relationships of mutuality and shared understandings’ (see also Brown and Duguid, 1998). Lindkvist goes on to distinguish between ‘communities of practice’ on the one hand, and ‘collectivities of practice’ such as project-based teams whose knowledge is more abstract and distributed (although we would argue that project members may nevertheless share or at least develop a shared practice which may be a necessary part of successful

collaboration). Others ascribe less homogeneity to communities of practice. For example, whilst citing a community's characteristics as 'mutual engagement', 'joint enterprise' and 'shared repertoire', Wenger (1998) does not presume that these generate shared understandings; indeed, Wenger acknowledges the possibility of conflict. Furthermore, there is variation in the choice of descriptive dimensions. For example, Roberts (2006; this issue) distinguishes between 'fast and slow' communities, whilst Wenger (1998) suggests that some communities die young whilst others endure for the long-term. It would seem that communities of practice are heterogeneous across several dimensions such as geographic spread, lifecycle and pace of evolution. Furthermore, as Brown and Duguid (2001) have argued, individuals may participate in loose '*networks of practice*' across organizational boundaries. It is through and in relation to these communities and networks that individuals develop their identities and practices through processes such as role modelling, experimentation and identity-construction.

Potential for tension and conflict exists because, during their lifetime, individuals participate not within one community (or collectivity or network) but within several – each with different practices and identity structures. Wenger (1998), for example, distinguished between the community of 'claims processors' and the community of 'claims managers' in his research on insurance claims processing, and argued that recently-promoted managers belonged to both communities. The important issue here is how individuals manage their roles, actions and relationships within multiple communities. Wenger suggests that:

... we engage in different practices in each of the communities of practice to which we belong. We often behave rather differently in each of them, construct different aspects of ourselves and gain different perspectives. (Wenger, 1998, p. 159)

Thus, Wenger portrays a picture of the compartmentalization of practices (one for each community setting), arguing that learning (and therefore, identity) is fully situated with little possibility of transfer or translation across contexts. Yet, if knowledge is to transfer across communities then Wenger's portrayal of the compartmentalization of practice is highly problematic (see also Detterman et al., 1996).

In contrast to this portrayal of discrete community practices, other authors point to the enduring power of early-socialized 'dispositions'. Mutch (2003) for example, draws on Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' and Bernstein's work on 'codes' to illustrate their argument that an individual's social and educational origins generate dispositions to act in similar ways even in different contexts. Here, there is a 'fatalism and an inevitable reproduction of existing patterns of thought and action' (Mutch, 2003, p. 397). Mutch rejects this 'fatalism' of continual reproduction by advocating a theoretical approach which emphasizes 'not the either/or of agency and structure, but the both/and' (ibid, p. 397). In relation to situated learning theory, Mutch's approach offers a mid-way between the contrasts of Wenger's compartmentalism and Bourdieu's/Bernstein's 'fatalism' to which we subscribe. His suggestion is that individuals maintain some

sense of agency through the adoption and adaptation of different forms of participation and identity construction within different communities of practice (see also Whittington, 1992).

An individual's continual negotiation of 'self' within and across multiple communities of practice may, of course, generate intra-personal tensions as well as instabilities within the community. One example of this in the workplace is the scenario where a newcomer experiences a conflict of identity in relation to a role or practice he or she is expected to adopt (cf. Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). Here, the concept of participation may go some way to explaining the individual's response. For example, the newcomer may choose to maintain a *marginal* (Wenger, 1998) form of participation in order to avoid compromising his or her sense of self (see also Child and Rodrigues's notion of 'embracement' and 'distance', 1996).

Alternatively, the newcomer may adapt his or her practice in ways which secure a continued sense of existential integrity whilst still notionally fitting in with community norms; i.e. exemplifying a *contingent* form of participation. A second alternative is that individuals avoid conflicts of identity and practice by choosing *not to join* (i.e. participate in) non-complementary communities of practice.

The presence of such tensions – and the forms of participation which are entailed – belie the assumption that a community represents a group of homogenous individuals whose motivations and behaviours can be controlled by management (cf. Wenger et al., 2001). Such a critique is, of course, familiar in relation to longstanding debates on organizational cultures, but has been neglected in relation to communities of practice. Numerous commentators have shown how, even where structural and normative commonalities have been produced, such as within an organization's management, there may be considerable diversity. What are important are relations and identifications in terms of, for example, gender, ethnicity, class, occupation and generation, as well as spatial groupings such as regions and work location (see also Whittington, 1992). Furthermore, identifications might not be readily located solely within particular communities of practice, but may instead be more liminal in character – 'betwixt and between' different communities of practice for example and yet actively involved in both (see Zabusky and Barley, 1997). In such cases, participation may be marginal but voluntarily so rather than 'excluded', which is the sense given by Wenger (1998).

THE NOTION OF 'PARTICIPATION' IN A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

In this paper we have emphasized the centrality of 'participation' to situated learning theory since, we argued, it is through participation in a community that individuals develop their identities and practice. At one level, participation is relatively simple to define: it involves action ('taking part') as well as relationships and connections to others in the community. There is something enduring about 'participation' which marks it off from a more limited forms of 'mere engagement in practice' (Wenger,

1998, p. 57). Wenger, referring to the claims processing community at an insurance company, suggests that:

... they do not cease to be claims processors at 5 o'clock. Their participation is not something they simply turn off when they leave. (ibid)

Instead, the effects of participation are more enduring, and they influence the claims processors' activities and relationships outside the formal work-setting and, we can assume, vice versa, regardless of particular location.

However, although the term 'participation' is used in the situated learning and community of practice literature with an appearance of shared meaning, the difficulties in operationalizing the term suggests a degree of ambiguity which, in its turn, throws into question our understanding of what constitutes a 'community of practice'. At the heart of this ambiguity is the difficulty of knowing when an individual *is* or *is not* 'participating' in a community of practice. How does participation differ from what Wenger calls 'mere engagement in practice' (Wenger, 1998, p. 57)? Can an individual be 'going through the motions' – appearing as a full participant – yet not participating in the sense of experiencing a feeling of belonging and, perhaps, of mutual commitment and responsibility? This distinction may be unimportant if all that matters is appearance. However, we argue that it *is* important since a key assumption in the community of practice literature is that participation entails a sense of belonging (or a desire to belong), mutual understanding and a 'progression' along a trajectory towards full participation which – indirectly – defines the community which is the target of 'belonging'.

To some extent, variations in the degree of participation (as felt by individuals or recognized and labelled by other members) are explained using qualifying terms: *peripheral* (for newcomers permitted to participate to a limited extent in simple, relatively discrete tasks and relationships); *full* (for oldtimers who participate at the core of the community); and *marginal* (for participants who are kept at the periphery of the community (Wenger, 1998, pp. 165–72)). An example of the latter from *Situated Learning* (Lave and Wenger, 1991) is the case of the meat-cutter apprentices in US supermarkets. Here, the 'commodification of labor' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 76) transformed apprentices into cheap labour who were put to work in ways that denied them access to the activities of a mature practice (ibid, pp. 65, 76).

However, some definitional confusion arises because Wenger states that marginal participation can be a form of 'non-participation' (Wenger, 1998, p. 116). The danger is that of potentially conflating those who participate (though marginally) with those who, technically, do not. Indeed, we suggest that only those individuals who successfully navigate a path from peripheral to full participation (in the eyes of the community 'masters') can be categorized as 'participating' in the sense outlined in *Situated Learning*. In

that case, there will be a greater number of individuals participating at the margins (voluntarily or not) than is acknowledged in some of the literature.

DISCUSSION

We began this paper by articulating the central concepts of situated learning theory: participation, identity and practice. We argued that it is *through* participation in a community that individuals develop their practices and identities. We then examined the notion of ‘community of practice’ and argued that individuals are likely to participate in multiple communities during their lifetime – each with distinct practices and identity structures – introducing tensions and conflicts as individuals negotiate their place within those communities.

However, whilst the ideas propounded in *Situated Learning* (Lave and Wenger, 1991) provide our basic inspiration, we recognize certain limitations with the original thesis as well as later developments by the individual authors. For example, and contrary to Wenger (1998), we suggested that the capacity of individuals to compartmentalize their identities and behaviours according to the community they were currently ‘in’ might be difficult to achieve, especially given a desire to maintain a coherent sense of self. Leaving aside Wenger's compartmentalism and Bourdieu/Bernstein's ‘fatalism’ about the enduring power of individual dispositions, we argued (following Mutch, 2003) that individuals maintain a sense of agency through the adoption and adaptation of different forms of participation and identity construction within different communities. This approach recognizes that attempts to adapt will generate tensions within individuals, and instabilities within the communities in which they participate. These tensions are likely to be continually negotiated but never fully resolved. Indeed, one could argue that the site for the development of identities and practices is not solely *within* a community of practice but in the spaces *between* multiple communities.

Seen in this light, the concept of ‘participation’ is perhaps rather ambiguous. In *Situated Learning*, the term ‘participation’ and its qualifiers (‘peripheral’ and ‘full’) successfully portrayed an apprentice's journey from novice to master; however, some conceptual confusion arises when one instead considers an individual's engagement within and between multiple communities. The heart of the issue revolves around the problematic distinction between *participation* and *practice*. These terms are sometimes used interchangeably. Yet one could argue that if ‘practice’ isn't just about ‘doing’ but is also about relationships, why use the term ‘participation’? On the other hand, if ‘participation’ isn't just about ‘being involved’ in a meaningful way but is also about ways-of-behaving, why use the term ‘practice’? Is an individual ‘participating’ in a community simply by acting in a way which appears similar to other

community members? Are individuals participating just because they ‘identify’ with the community (irrespective of their behaviours)?

One way to distinguish between these concepts is to focus on issues of meaning, and to reconsider the definition of ‘practice’ as it relates to situated learning theory. The conceptual difficulty here is that ‘practice’ can be interpreted in many ways. On the one hand, individuals learn to do (i.e. practice) something without fully knowing why it is done, nor being able to discuss what they do in a meaningful way. On the other hand, practice as *praxis* denotes meaningful engagement in our social communities – a definition which resembles that of participation. However, if we limit our understanding of ‘practice’ so that it is limited to ‘activity’, the concept of participation potentially becomes more valuable. ‘Participation’ can then be understood to denote *meaningful* activity where meaning is developed through relationships and shared identities (though there is still a distinction between *emic*[meaningful to me] and *etic*[meaningful as observed by others]). By qualifying and limiting ‘practice’, the definitions become more distinctive, and ‘practice’ becomes somewhat simpler to operationalize because it is limited to observable activity rather than the relationships and meanings which such activity may or may not imply. Furthermore, different forms of participation can be seen to reflect the many and varied ways in which individuals negotiate their engagement with communities of practice. We have already cited forms of participation which are peripheral, full, marginal or contingent. We suggest that further research is needed to identify others which reflect the range of possibilities for individual participation within and beyond communities of practice (see Roberts, 2006).

NOTE

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