

CONSTRUCTIVISM & STUDENT CENTERED LEARNING

6. JEAN LAVE & ETIENNE WEGNER: COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

6.1. Background Information for Lave and Wenger

Many of the ways that 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. But how would things look if we took a different track? Is it by 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 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 the reconceiving 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. 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* and later augmented in works by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger set the scene for some significant innovations in practice within organizations and more recently within some schools.

6.2. Communities of Practice

A Community of Practice (CoP) is, according to cognitive anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, a group of people who share a craft and/or a profession. The group can evolve naturally because of the members' common interest in a

particular domain or area, or it can be created specifically with the goal of gaining knowledge related to their field. It is through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group that the members learn from each other, and have an opportunity to develop themselves personally and professionally. CoPs exist in real life, such as in a lunch room at work, in a field setting, on a factory floor, or elsewhere in the environment, but members of CoPs do not have to be co-located. They form a “Virtual Community of Practice” (VCoP) when they collaborate online, such as within discussion boards and newsgroups, or a “Mobile Community of Practice” (MCoP) when members communicate with one another via mobile phones and participate in community work on the go. Communities of Practice are not new phenomena. This type of learning practice has existed for as long as people have been learning and sharing their experiences through storytelling. 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 wrote, “Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor: 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”.

Lave and Wenger suggest that 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 the Communities of Practice. 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. 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. According to Etienne Wenger, 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.
- **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.
- **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.

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 and communities develop around things that matter to people. 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 or 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. 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 some have discussed as social capital. 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. 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. It's 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. 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.

Lave and Wenger illustrate their theory by observations of different apprenticeships (e.g., 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 towards full participation. 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, artifacts, 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. 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. The focus is on the ways in which learning is an evolving, continuously renewed set of relations. In other words, this is a relational view of the person and learning.

6.3. Situated Learning, Learning Organizations and Learning Communities

This way of approaching learning is something more than simply learning by doing or experiential learning. 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 comment that the purpose is not to learn from talk as a substitute for legitimate peripheral participation. Rather, 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.**

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. There was a tendency in their earlier work of falling into this trap. In their eagerness to debunk testing, formal education and formal accreditation, they did not analyze how their omission of a range of questions and issues affected power relations, access, public knowledge and public accountability. Their interest in the forms of learning involved communities of practice shared some common element with learning webs and informal education. 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.

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.

Attention to Communities of Practice could 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.

6.4. Issues and Implications

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.

Learning is in the relationships between people. Learning traditionally gets measured 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 relationships through pressures on them to meet centrally determined targets, this approach to learning is challenging and profoundly problematic. Educators have a major educational task with policymakers as well as participants in their programs 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 theorist 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. 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.

There is an intimate connection between knowledge and activity. Learning is part of daily living. Problem solving and learning from experience are central processes although, as we have seen, situated learning is not the same as learning by doing. 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.