



Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation

Jean Lave , Etienne Wenger

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In this important theoretical treatise, Jean Lave, anthropologist, and Etienne Wenger, computer scientist, push forward the notion of situated learning--that learning is fundamentally a social process and not solely in the learner's head. The authors maintain that learning viewed as situated activity has as its central defining characteristic a process they call legitimate peripheral participation. Learners participate in communities of practitioners, moving toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community. Legitimate peripheral participation provides a way to speak about crucial relations between newcomers and oldtimers and about their activities, identities, artifacts, knowledge and practice. The communities discussed in the book are midwives, tailors, quartermasters, butchers, and recovering alcoholics, however, the process by which participants in those communities learn can be generalized to other social groups.

Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation Details

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From Reader Review Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation for online ebook

Trevor says

I'm surprised I've never heard of this book before, or, at least, if I did hear of it, it left no impression on me. But then a friend posted a list of the 25 most cited books in the social sciences – and this one was twelfth on the list.

There will be some quotes at the end of this review – this is a seriously interesting book. In many ways it is a reworking of Vygotsky's idea of the Zone of Proximal Development (mostly referred to as the ZPD). As the authors point out, too often the ZPD is discussed as being about 'scaffolding' – the idea that a teacher needs to provide support (assistance) to their students until the students are able to perform tasks without that support. Others refer to Vygotsky's idea that learning is inherently social. But often this only amounts to them thinking about education happening in the classroom and that ends up being as social as things get.

The authors are trying to rescue the idea of an apprenticeship from the notion that apprentices today belong to a bygone era or that they are only appropriate for certain kinds of learning. They repeatedly make the point that it is not their intention to directly discuss the type of learning that goes on in most classrooms – although, ultimately, this is inevitable and unavoidable.

A large part of the middle of this book is a discussion of various forms of apprenticeships devoted to uncovering the things that are similar or different between them. The major thing that is similar – and this is the core idea to the book, I feel – is that becoming an apprentice is a choice to become a certain type of person – it is a decision (although, decision is the wrong word) to have a particular kind of identity. If you decide you want to become a hairdresser and you start your apprenticeship, you have decided that you want to belong to that 'community of practice' and as such you need to learn not only the skills involved in cutting hair, but what being a hairdresser means as an identity.

This observation alone is striking, but mostly because it is the opposite of how we otherwise think of learning. For instance, in 'The Matrix' the main character learns kung fu by having his brain reprogrammed so that he has suddenly acquired all of the skills necessary in being able to fight. The authors of this book would say that just acquiring skills would not be enough, that 'being' a kung fu master does not reside in the skills you have in your head, but rather it needs you to find your place within a community of practice, for you to be acknowledged within that community and have a role in the production and reproduction processes that sustain that community. Where the traditional Western notion of 'learning' has stressed the acquisition of skills, this text stresses the relationships learners must enter into with those who 'already can', as well as with the 'artefacts' that are associated with their craft.

This last point is hard. If you are going to become a hairdresser you will need to learn how to use scissors – but not only scissors, other technologies too. Each of these will require a development of your level of skill, but these artefacts (tools and so on) have histories within and connections to the community you are entering which are much more intricate than merely their ability to perform specific tasks – in fact, they link to the whole history of the work you are seeking to learn to perform. And this isn't only true of the tools. This could also be true of where it is appropriate or inappropriate to perform your craft – so that appropriate spatial location could also become an important part of the artefacts you need to learn for the successful performance of your craft.

The authors say that there are three phases involved in becoming accepted as accomplished in a particular field: being accepted as a novice, being accepted as having skills that allow you to perform certain aspects of the craft (and perhaps even to help instruct other novices), and then having the skills of a master and therefore able to have your own novices. What is interesting here is that these phases do not have clearly defined edges – but rather they melt into one another. What is also important to notice is that as one acquires mastery they move closer to the centre of the community of practice.

In fact, the authors point out that novices often are literally only allowed to perform tasks at the edge of the field. The example they give is of tailors, but let's stick with the hairdresser for a moment – here the hairdresser apprentice will start out brushing up cut hair, or perhaps washing hair – that is, tasks that have a low-risk of going catastrophically wrong (cutting hair or dyeing hair would be in these categories) and therefore things that could cost the master real effort to fix. However, over time the tasks the apprentice performs build in complexity, also in how they allow for more general understandings of the craft itself. So, the tailor's apprentice gets to cut out material for underwear or hats, then some time they are taught to sew these together – but it is only in sewing them together that some of the reasons why the material had to be cut in that way becomes clear – why those shapes were necessary.

The apprentice may or may not be told why they have to do certain things in these ways – they may even be left to make these connections on their own – but the motion, as the authors say, is always centripetal: the apprentice acquires knowledge and skills that allow them to move closer to the centre of the craft they are learning – and therefore they also learn to do the increasingly 'important' aspects of that craft.

Which goes some way to explaining the idea of Legitimate Peripheral Participation – which is the core idea of this book and basically their reworking of Vygotsky's ZPD. Learning to become a master – that is, to stop being a novice – involves being allowed to work in the field (that is, being welcomed into the craft) and often this involves being able to sit on the periphery of the task. This may not sound terribly good in itself – but since this is the only way you can learn a craft, it is actually as good as it gets. You can't sit at the centre with no experience at all unless you are doing something that is mostly meaningless (say, being President of the USA, for instance). Otherwise, if the task required real skills and knowledge, some time would be needed to acquire those skills and knowledge. That time necessarily involves sitting on the edge of the real action – but this gives you a vantage point from which to observe and to practice the necessary skills.

The authors make it clear that this involvement isn't merely generous on the part of the masters – but rather the apprentice is productive from the very beginning, and therefore has already begun their contribution to the whole community. They have already been given real tasks to perform and those real tasks contribute immediately to the work of the community of practice being entered. This is not like 'school' where it might never be clear to you why you are doing some task (other than that the teacher told you to), but rather you are always engaged with an actual and meaningful involvement from the very beginning. Here the meaning of the word 'legitimate' has a few meanings – it is not just that you are 'allowed' to join this group (that is, have been made legitimate by being allowed to join) although it means this too, but rather also that what you are doing isn't just 'made up' non-work, but work with intrinsic worth you can be immediately proud of – and so legitimate in this sense too. This work is interesting, and this fact too helps to motivate learners.

The word participation is important too, since the learning you are doing is only possible and only meaningful because it is occurring within a community of practice – that is, the social nature of what is going on isn't an 'added extra' – it is the entire point. This really is looking down the other end of the telescope when compared to what normally happens in schools – where the focus is often on breaking tasks down to specifiable skills that then are forced into the heads of students in more or less bitesize chunks. The focus in Legitimate Peripheral Participation isn't on the quickest and easiest way of getting skills into someone's

head, but in finding ways that they can belong to the community of practice.

This means there is less likely to be a forced distinction between the abstract and concrete aspects of tasks, as there often is in schools, for instance, and where the abstract is given higher status than the concrete – it turns out, these terms hardly apply to the apprentice situation, as they mesh together in the work of the community, with it being almost impossible to continue acquiring ‘practical’ skills until these skills are understood within their increasing generality and this generality can’t be understood until you have seen the skill applied across a range of situations.

The examples given are seriously interesting – for instance, becoming a mid-wife may well occur without the person about to become a mid-wife even being completely aware that is what is happening. The Alcoholics Anonymous apprenticeship – clearly used in the broadest sense of the term – is also really interesting since it makes abundantly clear the idea of seeking to acquire a new identity which the authors say is utterly central to seeking to belong to a new community of practice.

This made me think about how well all this could be integrated into school classrooms – and I think there is much here that could really be useful in them. The problem, as the authors make very clear, is that schools are often about ‘selling skills’ and that this commodification of skills shifts learning and the skills themselves from having a use value to having an ‘exchange value’ – and this isolates the skills from the lived expression of them as they exist within a community of practice and therefore breaks the link necessary for legitimate peripheral participation. And this further requires forms of assessment (testing that the skill has, in fact, been learnt) that is also simply not necessary in a community of practice.

This is a seriously interesting and remarkably short book – but I’ve been reading about learning theory for quite a few years now, and this book has quickly become a favourite.

Some quotes

Forward by W.F. Hanks

Lave and Wenger’s work was really exciting because it located learning squarely in the processes of coparticipation, not in the heads of individuals. 13

they ask what kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place. 14

Learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind. 15

Learning is, as it were, distributed among coparticipants, not a one- person act. 15

Quite simply, if learning is about increased access to performance, then the way to maximize learning is to perform, not to talk about it. 22

Book Proper

Learning viewed as situated activity has as its central defining characteristic a process that we call legitimate peripheral participation. 29

Apprenticeship had become yet another panacea for a broad spectrum of learning-research problems, and it was in danger of becoming meaningless. 30

That perspective meant that there is no activity that is not situated. 33

The generality of any form of knowledge always lies in the power to renegotiate the meaning of the past and future in constructing the meaning of present circumstances. 34

There is no place in a community of practice designated "the periphery," and, most emphatically, it has no single core or center. 36

peripherality, when it is enabled, suggests an opening, a way of gaining access to sources for understanding through growing involvement. 37

We should emphasize, therefore, that legitimate peripheral participation is not itself an educational form, much less a pedagogical strategy or a teaching technique. It is an analytical viewpoint on learning, a way of understanding learning. 40

All theories of learning are based on fundamental assumptions about the person, the world, and their relations 47

Conventional explanations view learning as a process by which a learner internalizes knowledge, whether "discovered," "transmitted" from others, or "experienced in interaction" with others. 47

In contrast with learning as internalization, learning as increasing participation in communities of practice concerns the whole person acting in the world. 49

a theory of social practice emphasizes the relational interdependency of agent and world, activity, meaning, cognition, learning, and knowing. 50

Its meaning to given actors, its furnishings, and the relations of humans with/in it, are produced, reproduced, and changed in the course of activity (which includes speech and thought, but cannot be reduced to one or the other). 51

One way to think of learning is as the historical production, transformation, and change of persons. 51

learning involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to specific activities, but a relation to social communities - it implies becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person. 53

Thus identity, knowing, and social membership entail one another. 53

in situations where learning-in-practice takes the form of apprenticeship, succeeding generations of participants give rise to what in its simplest form is a triadic set of relations: The community of practice encompasses apprentices, young masters with apprentices, and masters some of whose apprentices have themselves become masters. 56

learning is never simply a process of transfer or assimilation 57

we must not forget that communities of practice are engaged in the generative process /

of producing their own future. 57-8

We present excerpts from five accounts of apprenticeship: among Yucatec Mayan midwives in Mexico (Jordan 1989), among Vai and Gola tailors in Liberia (Lave in preparation), in the work-learning settings of U.S. navy quartermasters (Hutchins in press), among butchers in U.S. supermarkets (Marshall 1972), and among "nondrinking alcoholics" in Alcoholics Anonymous (Cain n.d.). 65

The commoditization of labor can transform apprentices into a cheap source of unskilled labor, put to work in ways that deny them access to activities in the arenas of mature practice. 76

Gaining legitimacy is also a problem when masters prevent learning by acting in effect as pedagogical authoritarians, viewing apprentices as novices who "should be instructed" rather than as peripheral participants in a community engaged in its own reproduction. 76

The example of the butchers illustrates several of the potential ways in which particular forms of apprenticeship can prevent rather than facilitate learning. 76

the main business of A. A. is the reconstruction of identity 80

If masters don't teach, they embody practice at its fullest in the community of practice. 85

The importance of language should not, however, be overlooked. Language is part of practice, and it is in practice that people learn. 85

the important point concerning learning is one of access to practice as a resource for learning, rather than to instruction. 85

Learning itself is an improvised practice 93

To take a decentered view of master-apprentice relations leads to an understanding that mastery resides not in the master but in the organization of the community of practice of which the master is part 94

newcomers' legitimate peripherality provides them with more than an "observational" lookout post: It crucially involves participation as a way of learning 95

Production activity-segments must be learned in different sequences than those in which a production process commonly unfolds, if peripheral, less intense, less complex, less vital tasks are learned before more central aspects of practice. 96

This leads us to distinguish between a learning curriculum and a teaching curriculum. A learning curriculum consists of situated opportunities (thus including exemplars of various sorts often thought of as "goals") for the improvisational development of new practice (Lave 1989). A learning curriculum is a field of learning resources in everyday practice viewed from the perspective of learners. A teaching curriculum, by contrast, is constructed for the instruction of newcomers. 97

A learning curriculum is essentially situated. 97

A learning curriculum is thus characteristic of a community. 97

The community of practice of midwifery or tailoring involves much more than the technical knowledgeable skill involved in delivering babies or producing clothes. 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. 98

In this view, problems of schooling are not, at their most fundamental level, pedagogical. Above all, they have to do with the ways in which the community of adults reproduces itself 100

we suggest that learning occurs through centripetal participation in the learning curriculum of the ambient community. 100

The artifacts employed in ongoing practice, the technology of practice, provide a good arena in which to discuss the problem of access to understanding. In general, social scientists who concern themselves with learning treat technology as a given and are not analytic about its interrelations with other aspects of a community of practice. 101

Thus, understanding the technology of practice is more than learning to use tools; it is a way to connect with the history of the practice and to participate more directly in its cultural life. 101

Transparency in its simplest form may just imply that the inner workings of an artifact are available for the learner's inspection: The black box can be opened, it can become a "glass box." 102

The butchers' apprentices participate legitimately, but not peripherally, in that they are not given productive access to activity in the community of practitioners. 104

An important point about such sequestering when it is institutionalized is that it encourages a folk epistemology of dichotomies, for instance, between "abstract" and "concrete" knowledge. These categories do not reside in the world as distinct forms of knowledge, nor do they reflect some putative hierarchy of forms of knowledge among practitioners. 104

Abstraction in this sense stems from the disconnectedness of a particular cultural practice. 104

Verbal instruction has been assumed to have special, and especially effective properties with respect to the generality and scope of the understanding that learners come away with, while instruction by demonstration - learning by "observation and imitation" - is supposed to produce the opposite, a literal and narrow effect. 105

In the Psychology of Literacy, Scribner and Cole (1981) speculate that asking questions - learning how to "do" school appropriately - may be a major part of what school teaches. 107

In a community or practice, there are no special forms of discourse aimed at apprentices or crucial to their centripetal movement toward full participation that correspond to the marked genres of the question-answer-evaluation format of classroom teaching 108

For newcomers then 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. 109

To be able to participate in a legitimately peripheral way entails that newcomers have broad access to arenas of mature practice. 110

Allie says

It's very dense, and I had a hard time with the jargon, but the theory is really important, and I learned a lot.

Katie says

Lave and Wenger (1992) present their theory of legitimate peripheral learning as a conceptual tool for analyzing learning environments and as framework to explain learning as a ubiquitous social practice. For the authors, intentional learning and instruction are not the only causes of learning. Individual learning through social practice is conditional upon the existence of communities of practice. Communities of practice are groups of individuals that interact with each other to collectively produce and reproduce specific knowledge and or skills (Lave & Wenger, 98). Learning takes place processually through iterative interaction and eventual identification with specific communities of practice. Although this model is based on analysis of apprenticeship models of learning, Lave and Wegner's (1992) theory does not require the presence of a 'master' or 'teacher'. In fact, they argue that the knowledge of a master (or teacher) and a beginning apprentice (or learner) is "too distant" and does not provide the scaffolding necessary to communicate and promote effective learning (92-93).

The learner is situated peripherally within communities of practice until they have acquired the necessary practices and learned to participate in the reproduction of knowledge. Although there is no center, no end goal to situated peripheral learning, this theory does imply that an individual becomes an active member of the community of practice when they are able to transmit knowledge and help create situated learning experiences for other new peripheral learners. Cultural reproduction then, is dependent upon transparency and access to the knowledge contained in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 101-102). Researching the process of apprenticeship and learning in Lave and Wenger's model reveals the structural characteristics of communities of practice. It also elucidates the boundary trajectories necessary for individuals to move within and between various communities of practice. Tensions between newcomers and older members of communities of practice may reveal conflicts in the cultural reproduction cycle and suggest contradictions or ideational incompatibility.

Kevin says

Had to read for my Supervision class. It discusses how learning is more than a independent task but rather takes place within a social context. The book uses examples of apprenticeship to show the varying success that type of situation can have on learning. Let me know if you want to know more!

Kristy says

Theory is incredibly useful, but some things need to be re-thought... Don't worry, I am working on it..

Burke says

Wonderful...surely I will always turn to this as a key to my approach to how learning happens and how schools should look.

alternBRUNO°° says

Aprendizaje situado es acerca de la construcción de una teoría de la práctica para descentrar el aprendizaje en los contextos educativos y disolver la dicotomía maestro-alumno o maestro-aprendiz como única manera posible de poder entablar recursos cognitivos y ser aprendiz de algo.

La propuesta tiene su mérito: sacar tanto el término como la concepción del aprendizaje de las aulas y las cabezas de las personas para colocarlas en las prácticas sociales donde se desarrollan. Esto se logra estableciendo primero una distinción entre "aprendizaje" (apprenticeship en inglés) y aprendizaje (learning), una distinción no sólo conceptual sino una restitución del "aprendizaje" como forma válida de entrar a un análisis de los procesos de aprendizaje de las personas en distintos contextos. Este aprendizaje se consigue utilizando los recursos de la estructura social y las herramientas cognitivas de lo que se requiere en determinada trayectoria.

Se va gestando y explicando lentamente los motivos por los que se elige como unidad de análisis Participación Periférica Legítima (PPL) y se utilizan de ejemplo 5 casos donde la gente que aprende no se dedica exclusivamente a observar o imitar las actividades, por el contrario, se compromete a reproducir y producir una práctica que forma parte de una estructura social y dotada de significados particulares.

La PPL involucra un reconocimiento de la persona como aprendiz y actor del mundo social, esto lo hace perteneciente y lo empodera con respecto a la práctica que realiza. Las parteras, los sastres, los contramaestres, los carniceros y los alcohólicos no-bebedores ilustran de manera fenomenal cómo es que una persona entra a un proceso de aprendizaje de diversas maneras y con múltiples significados, no sólo con un objetivo claro y definido, como podría pensarse en un sistema de reproducción de "oficios" asociados a la era preindustrializada.

El análisis y el desmenuzamiento que hacen los autores del planteamiento, es un intento formidable de abordar el carácter histórico y relacional de lo aprendido, incluso recuperando la teoría vigotskiana para dar cuenta de un proceso de internalización que deviene en prácticas de un orden social generativo, al contrario de la tradición como solución de problemas o como la combinación de lo científico con lo cotidiano.

Es sin duda un texto obligado para discutir, debatir y desdoblarse para cualquiera con pretensiones de hallar lo psicológico desde una mirada social. Y más allá, es una herramienta invaluable para la investigación cualitativa cuando se trata de procesos de desarrollo y aprendizaje antes que de etapas o estadios.

Sara says

More sociocultural theory - this time a focus on communities of practice. The authors explore the learning

process by considering how newcomers are fully brought into full participation with the community. (A very simplified version!)

Sterling says

What does it mean to learn? Is it the reception and storage of knowledge and information, or does learning encompass more than instruction and learning often exemplified in traditional classrooms?

Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger write that learning is naturally social and occurs in more fluid ways that have traditionally been defined. Legitimate peripheral participation boils down to the journey newcomers and old-timers take together within their moving field of practice. Lave and Wenger share field examples of how midwives, tailors, quartermasters, butchers, and participants in the Alcoholics Anonymous program enter their respective learning areas—first as peripheral participants—and through legitimate practice, develop their knowledge, skill, and discourse moving from novices to experts.

It's a dynamic theory of learning which respects the fact that learning occurs as we interact with our social worlds.

Kyla says

really good ideas. Some odd example choices. Last section the best as it ties everything together.

Ed Summers says

A concise, clear and theoretically deep analysis of how people learn in communities of practice. L & W use an ethnographic approach that attends to relations between people, activities and the world, mostly outside the classroom. Their idea of Legitimate Peripheral Participation centers on notions of identity, artifacts and the dialectical contradiction found in continuation-displacement, where newcomers ultimately replace old timers. I was surprised by, but interested to read how LPP is directly informed by Marx. This book gets cited all the time in the practice theory literature so I had to read it—and it was well worth it!

Rehenuma says

Really short read about how learning occurs.. especially in group settings- very helpful in thinking about how we as individuals learn through the situations we are put into.

lilly says

Super short but densely written. Reading about communities of practice (in detail) makes me rethink so many learning experiences I've had. Interesting both academically and for everyday life.

Kenneth Packer says

I love this perspective on learning and knowledge.

Kim says

For years I've run across Lave and Wenger in the citations of other works on learning theory. I'm glad I finally read the real thing! This is a foundational text in situated learning. It's an insightful exploration of how people move from being novice learners on the periphery of a community of practice towards becoming seasoned, encultured practitioners able to share knowledge with new learners. The writing can be a bit dense at times, but it's rich with useful concepts and examples taken from diverse apprenticeship settings. Reading this book stimulated many insights from my own learning (especially in regard to professional practice) and ideas for how to enable better learning among the students and early career professionals with whom I work.
