



# 14

## JEAN LAVE AND ETIENNE WENGER

### SOCIALLY SITUATED LEARNING AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

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#### LEARNING OUTCOMES

Having read this chapter you should be able to:

- understand the impact of both Lave and Wenger on social learning
- recognise the aspects of both situated learning and communities of practice
- apply these notions of social learning to your practice, setting and professional development
- appraise the facets of social learning in a variety of formal and informal educational settings.

#### KEY WORDS

situated learning; communities of practice; apprenticeship; legitimate peripheral participation; situatedness

## INTRODUCTION

Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's concept of socially **situated learning** offered a notion of learning which was at odds with conventional thinking regarding teaching and learning. Their notion of situated learning challenged the deeply held belief that learning is the product of teaching. For them, learning was about individuals being involved in the processes of social activity rather than being passive receivers of knowledge. Huddleston and Unwin give an outline of the main premise of Lave and Wenger's concept of socially situated learning:

What is important here is that knowledge and skills are seen as not belonging solely to an individual but things which are to be shared and developed collectively. In addition, it is the social, political, economic and cultural dimensions of any community of practice and the nature of the interactions between members that determine how much learning occurs. (2002: 97)

Lave and Wenger's ideas were first published in their co-authored book, *Situated Learning: Legitimate peripheral participation* (1991), and later enhanced by Wenger's *Communities of Practice: Learning, meaning and identity* (1998), which considered further the development of **communities of practice** in organisations. These works are of significant relevance in offering a different perspective on how we learn and how that learning can be further developed. Although these notions of socially situated learning are of particular importance for work-based learning, they could also be applied in school classrooms and workshops.

The motivation behind *Situated Learning: Legitimate peripheral participation* was a desire to explore how people learned new knowledge and skills without being part of a formal training process. Data came from empirical research from different geographical locations and work contexts (Lave and Wenger, 1991). From the outcomes of these studies, Lave and Wenger believed that looking at '**apprenticeship** simply in terms of "learning by doing" provided an unsatisfactory account of the ordered way in which apprentices learned their craft' (Fuller et al., 2005: 51). They felt that the true nature of such situated learning involved a multifaceted process including relationships and culture.

This notion of learning as being a situated and social pursuit of knowledge and skills is core to the procedure they termed **legitimate peripheral participation**, where learners involve themselves in communities with other practitioners to develop their practice. Learners become increasingly adept in their mastery of skills and knowledge which they gain from the more experienced practitioners, eventually developing into fully fledged members of that community (Coles, 2004). As such, legitimate peripheral participation describes the 'relationships between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artefacts' (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 29) and how learners become part of a community of practice. Lave and Wenger argue that such

communities of practice are widespread and learners are involved in a variety of them. These can include formal settings such as organisations, schools and universities or more informal situations such as hobby and interest groups. Furthermore, as individuals we may be on the periphery or indeed central figures of these communities of practice, but what is of importance is that all members have a common interest and share practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). However, for these theorists, membership of a community of practice does not necessarily indicate

... a well-defined, identifiable group, or socially visible boundaries. It does imply participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities. (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 98)

The conceptual details of situated learning and communities of practice will be explored later in this chapter.

## JEAN LAVE AND ETIENNE WENGER, THE PEOPLE

Both Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger are academics from the United States and although they come from different scholarly fields they share a fascination for the social aspects of learning. Jean Lave gained her PhD at Harvard in 1968 and is a social anthropologist by profession with a research interest in social theory. Her research has included schooling and education 'in pre-industrial societies and, through comparisons with the corresponding American conditions, she has become a strong advocate of "practice learning"' (Lave, 2009: 200). As Professor of Education at the University of California, Berkeley, she concerned herself with the way learners interact socially between themselves and with their educational institutions. Latterly she became Professor Emerita of Geography, Berkeley. Her (1988) *Cognition in Practice: Mind, mathematics and culture in everyday life* was a fresh and radical exploration of human cognition and problem solving. It was radical because previous ways of studying human cognition involved laboratory research, but Lave employed ideas of social history and culture to discover how everyday arithmetic problems were solved in different social settings. Three of her other major works which sought to understand social cognition in everyday settings are *Understanding Practice: Perspectives on activity and context* (co-edited with Seth Chaiklin, 1993), *Apprenticeship in Critical Ethnographic Practice* (with Thomas Gibson, 2011) and *Learning and Everyday Life: Access, participation, and changing practice* (with Ana Maria Gomes, 2019).

Fellow American Etienne Wenger was born in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, and as a young man spent three years living in Hong Kong. He studied computer science in both the USA and Switzerland (Wenger, 2009). He is an independent researcher and author, and also acts as a consultant helping organisations to develop communities of

practice. Prior to this he was a teacher. He completed his PhD on artificial intelligence at the University of California. He joined the Institute for Research on Learning in Palo Alto, California in 1987, where together with Jean Lave he started work on communities of learning (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2020). His (1987) book *Artificial Intelligence and Tutoring Systems: Computational and cognitive approaches to the communication of knowledge* considers, in a scientific manner, the nature of cognition and knowledge and how they are communicated to the learner. His ideas from the book challenged the traditional and didactic approach to learning and teaching evident in schools and universities (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). More recently, in 2020, together with his partner Beverly, a fellow social learning advocate, he wrote *Learning to Make a Difference: Value creation in social learning spaces*. His commitment, enthusiasm and championing for socially situated learning still shines through in this book, particularly regarding learning in times of such global uncertainty:

We need a different learning theory for the twenty-first century – and it will have to be social learning theory. We need to learn to live together on a small planet, where we don't know what's going to happen next and where the survival of our species appears to be at stake. (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2020: 3)

## LAVE AND WENGER'S CONCEPT OF SITUATED LEARNING AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Situated learning and communities of practice are clearly located within social learning, but before we proceed any further it is fitting that we briefly consider social learning as a notion and why Lave and Wenger's ideas are different and advanced in their concept. Although in the past the study of learning has been examined through a psychological rather than a sociological lens, it has become increasingly obvious that learning is a social activity – a notion supported by the works of Vygotsky and Bruner (see Chapters 4 and 8). Both of these educational philosophers argued that knowledge was socially constructed. These social constructivist approaches stress that knowledge allows learners to have a 'holistic understanding ... an integrated view of learning rather than a disciplinary-based one' (Jarvis et al., 2003: 43). Yet it is argued that, unlike social constructivist learning, socially situated learning emphasises the culture of the social participation, the nurturing of relationships and, in particular, the shared specific purpose of the activity. Therefore, situated learning 'should be viewed as sociocultural approaches instead of social constructivist' (Gredler, 2005: 8). It is with this understanding of how Lave and Wenger's progressive theories are distinct from the more conventional ideas of social constructivism that we can now seek to analyse and chart the development of their work.

Lave and Wenger's original purpose in considering the concept of situated learning was to look again, from a theoretical perspective, at the concept of apprenticeship.

The idea that learning by means of apprenticeships was one of legitimate peripheral practice initially emerged from research with the aforementioned (such as those previously mentioned by Fuller et al., 2005) craft apprentices: Liberian tailors, butchers from US supermarkets, Mayan midwives, US Navy quartermasters and non-drinking alcoholics who were members of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). The last obviously cannot be considered to be craft apprentices, but the findings and the learning processes involved were surprisingly parallel with the craft apprenticeships studied. The research uncovered some interesting data which differed from standard assumptions about apprenticeships – that learning was more complex and involved social interaction and was not just a routine and mechanistic matter of the learner copying what is done by the old-timer or master, for example. Although the types of apprenticeships and even their geographical locations were varied, all – apart from the butchers – were found to offer effective learning opportunities.

It is important to briefly compare and contrast each of these apprenticeships in order to understand the nature of Lave and Wenger's analysis and their concept of situated learning and communities of practice. The midwives were mostly the daughters of experienced midwives themselves and used herbal remedies and ritual practices; their practice was very much part of their daily life. The tailors and quartermasters both used technology. The tailors used basic forms of technology, such as sewing machines, scissors and needles, and master tailors worked individually but were assisted by their apprentices. The quartermasters used higher forms of technological instruments and worked collaboratively with others, including their trainers, to become qualified. Butchers received formal learning at trade schools as well as situated learning in supermarkets. Both quartermasters and butchers gained formal certification. The non-drinking alcoholics were members of AA and saw themselves as a part of that community. Their apprenticeship was 'sanctified by an explicit commitment ... through well-defined "steps" of membership' (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 67).

There are a number of associations which come to the fore when considering these different apprenticeships. In particular, all are concerned with the development of an ever-increasing level of participation and knowledge accumulation which have differing degrees of difficulty to be overcome (Lave and Wenger, 1991). For the midwives, it was how learning progresses without a formally organised curriculum. For the tailors, it was about access to a curriculum within the restrictions of the day-to-day practice in busy workshops. For the non-drinking alcoholics, talk was a significant aspect in their transformation. The quartermasters underwent formal training in groups under the watchful eyes of their trainers in a realistic and purposeful environment mostly undertaken on board ships, moving steadily from peripheral to vital collaborative tasks such as plotting the position of their ship. The findings from the apprentice butchers are particularly interesting. It was found their training could hinder rather than help learning, mainly for two reasons. Firstly, because of the type of teaching employed, where trainers saw 'apprentices as novices who "should be instructed" rather than as peripheral participants in a community engaged in its own

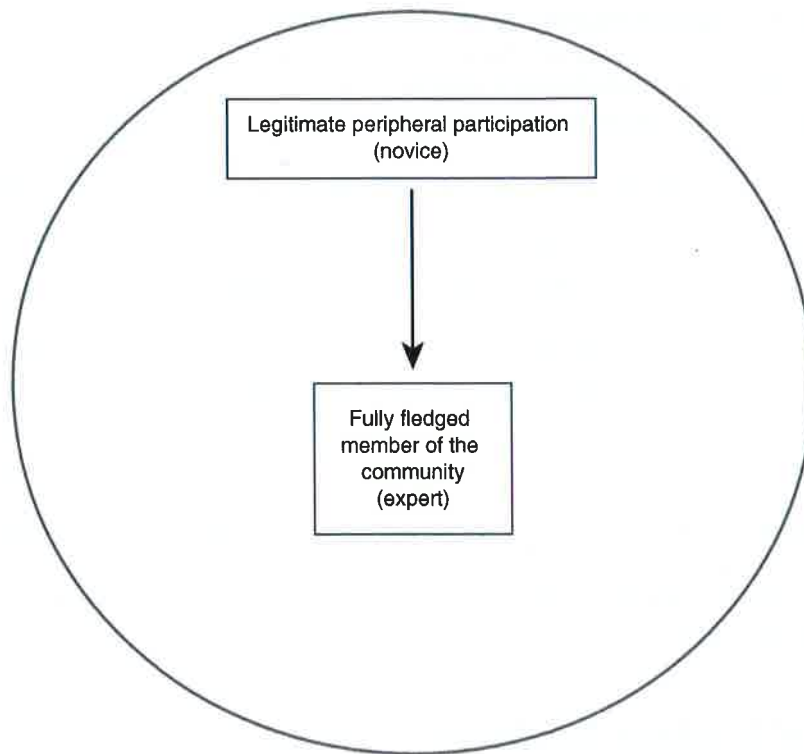
reproduction' (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 76). Secondly, apprentices felt that assignments in the trade school were not relevant to their practice in supermarkets. However, the studies did reveal that learning from everyday practice, the importance of motivation and the need for learners to develop an identity through a notion of legitimate peripheral practice were central to the concept of situated learning.

The links between the traditional view of apprenticeship and the theory of situated learning were strengthened by the analysis of these studies, through which a more thorough idea of the varied methods of what Lave and Wenger termed '**situatedness**' emerged (1991: 32). The more effective approaches to situatedness occurred when legitimate peripheral participation was embraced by the whole community. We have already seen that legitimate peripheral practice enables practitioners to learn from their more experienced peers, gradually becoming fully fledged members of their community. As portrayed in Figure 14.1, the process of learning within communities of practice is what Lave and Wenger (1991: 100) term 'centripetal'; in other words, learning begins on the periphery and moves toward the centre. Learning is a shared undertaking which includes all members, and facilitates novices to gradually become fully fledged and experienced members of the community (experts). Knowledge is achieved through a shared use of speech, thought and ways of learning; it is an engagement which enables individuals to bond with others who have similar goals into a social unit (Wallace, 2008). It is a truly interactive and dynamic practice where skills and knowledge are achieved:

The individual learner is not gaining a discrete body of abstract knowledge which (s)he will then transport and reapply in later contexts. Instead, (s)he acquires the skill to perform by actually engaging in the process. (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 14)

This engagement (or participation) is centred upon socially situated interpretations of knowledge, which in turn entail a shared view of experience and comprehension between novice and experienced participants. Legitimate peripheral participation, then, does not involve a prescribed process between teaching, learning and the learner carrying out an activity; it is a more encompassing notion where 'persons, actions, and the world are implicated in all thought, speech, knowing, and learning' (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 52). Legitimate peripheral participation is a transformational process and is inspired by the increasing worth of belonging and the novices' wishes to become full and experienced members of a community of practice.

Participants in communities of practices learn how to fit in, how to contribute and how to change their community. As we have seen, the new participant moves from novice to experienced and full member of their community. Wenger (1998) argues that communities of practice have the following three essential characteristics: mutual engagement (as participants work and support each other); joint enterprise (a mediated and collective understanding of their activities and purpose); and a shared repertoire (members employ a range of related manners, tools, artefacts, ways of behaving and communicating). Communities of practice



**Figure 14.1** Communities of practice – from legitimate peripheral participation to fully fledged member

require members to have shared ways of 'doing and approaching things' (Smith, 2003). It involves a participation that not only 'shapes what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do' (Wenger, 1998: 4). Wenger considered that participation alone was not enough to build meaningful communities of practice: what was needed was structure to support and complement participation. This structure is what Wenger terms 'reification' – the mission statements of values and norms, the protocols for getting things done; and at the same time genuine opportunities for 'participation' – acting, interacting mutually. Structures with too little participation are bureaucratic shells; participation without structure may be experienced as chaos. Both structure and participation are needed in balance (Collins et al., 2002: 135).

Wenger (1998) put forward the theory of socially situated learning comprised of four peripheral components, all of which were required to exemplify social engagement as a manner of knowing and learning. Each of these components emphasises the importance of 'ways of talking', and the use of storytelling. This was particularly

important for the non-drinking alcoholics, who considered that telling their own stories of how they became alcoholics and their efforts in not drinking was a significant medium for exhibiting their membership of their community of practice. The components for socially situated learning were as follows:

1. *Meaning*: a way of talking about our (changing) ability – individually and collectively – to experience our life and the world as meaningful.
2. *Practice*: a way of talking about the shared historical and social resources, frameworks and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action.
3. *Community*: a way of talking about the social configurations in which enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognisable as competence.
4. *Identity*: a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities.

(Wenger, 1998: 5)

Many of Lave and Wenger's notions of learning being a social and active process and a central aspect of our everyday lives and experiences are not entirely original. Indeed, their ideas have similarities with those of a range of theorists, particularly those who promoted the importance of social and cultural attributes in learning.

## LINKS WITH OTHER THEORISTS

Although we have argued at the start of the previous section that Lave and Wenger's ideas are socially situated rather than socially constructed, there are many similarities between their work and that of Vygotsky and Bruner. Lave and Wenger's work became a part of a growing interest in the 1990s which 'centred around socio-cultural activity theory which builds on the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky' (Huddleston and Unwin, 2002: 98). Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) was based on a child's learning being enhanced through problem solving in partnership with others, mainly in the classroom. Lave and Wenger have broadened Vygotsky's concept to include adults learning in work as well as in other informal settings (Huddleston and Unwin, 2002). Furthermore, Bruner's application of scaffolding, an important and common practice in contemporary classrooms, is strongly associated with Lave and Wenger's concept of apprenticeships; an association, however, which is sometimes unrecognised (Olson, 2007). Additionally, Vygotsky's and Bruner's theories are also evident in the emerging ideas of socially situated learning where matters of culture, environment and active participant learning are all significant factors. Lave and Wenger's ideas expanded social constructivism further. This is particularly the case for adults where socially situated learning, supported by reflection and within a community of practice, formed the basis of continuous professional development (Dennick, 2008). Furthermore, situated



learning is closely aligned with Paulo Freire's notion of problem-posing education with its emphasis on culture, community and a shared language.

Lave and Wenger's notions are also comparable with those of Bourdieu, who contested that people discover how to learn by what is around them; in this way they become a part of the learning community by adopting culturally accepted feelings and behaviours. As such, learning is perceived as being socially situated within a culture which:

Suggests how participation within a culture shapes individual disposition and physical behaviour in relation to their situation. ... Thus a person gets a feel for a situation which may look like the rational consideration, yet it is not based upon reasoning but upon an unstated, usually unnoticed incorporation of culture, which is simultaneously shaped through individual participation. (Avis et al., 2010: 53)

An interesting association with children's learning is the work of Bandura, who argued that for children to reach their full potential they needed to acquire a 'mastery' of skills by watching other children achieving. Although children were central to Bandura's work, it is appealing to consider that it has many similarities with Lave and Wenger's notion of socially situated learning, which was originally focused on adult learning. For example, Bandura emphasised the importance of experience and observation in gaining 'mastery', as well as children hearing supporting comments from others and appreciating the emotions involved by learning with their peers (MacBlain, 2014). There are also close links between Guy Claxton's notion of epistemic apprenticeship and situated learning and communities of practice (Claxton, 2012). Similarly, there are close ties with Barak Rosenshine's concept of cognitive apprenticeship. Linda Darling-Hammond's advocating the benefits of her Professional Development Schools, where teachers learn from more experienced colleagues, compares with the ideas and practice of situated learning. Finally, parallel to Lave and Wenger's views that learning is a more complex process than just experience and the observation of others, Kolb argued that experience must be transformative and include both action and practice for true learning to take place. Moreover, according to Kolb (1984), learning is an ongoing process and involves reflection; it is a culturally grounded experience where the process is more important than the product.

At the end of this section it is fitting to comment on how other scholars have adapted the concept of communities of practice, using the overarching meaning of the concept to develop their own ideas. Coffield and Williamson's book *From Exam Factories to Communities of Discovery* (2011), which took an interesting and radical view of the function of schools with their increased emphasis on exams rather than learning, is an example of such an adaptation. They use the term 'communities of discoveries' as an 'extension' to the concept of communities of practice, 'to describe the creative engagement of citizen-learners at all stages of their lives in tackling the collective problems we face in new ways' (2011: 12).

## CRITIQUING LAVE AND WENGER

Both Lave and Wenger have experienced a fair degree of criticism of their works. This is mainly due to the perceived simplicity of their theory of socially situated learning and their concept of communities of practice, as well as a romanticised notion of apprenticeship (Grubb and Lazerson, 2006). In particular, the relevance of their ideas in modern and complex settings, matters of consensus and power and the relationships between novices and old-timers have all been areas of dispute. There is a level of uncertainty as to whether or not the findings from the four craft apprenticeships and the recovering alcoholics from AA, they analysed are an appropriate base to apply in the very pressurised, sophisticated and highly technological settings of most modern industries (Fuller et al., 2005). However, Wenger did try to address this in *Communities of Practice: Learning, meaning and identity* (1998) when he used the outcomes of an ethnographic study in a large medical insurance claims processing centre in the United States.

Some critics argue that workplaces, and educational settings, are not always places where colleagues share their practices willingly. In many larger settings, there may be a number of communities of practice created in specific departments which are at odds with other departments. Where this conflict does happen it is likely to cause tension and disharmony rather than lead to shared knowledge and consensus (Entwistle, 2009), although Wenger does emphasise that engagement with other communities of practice is necessary: 'joining a community of practice involves entering not only its internal configuration but also its relations with the rest of the world' (Wenger, 1998: 103). This engagement should take place on the boundaries of the communities where their interests overlap, or join together at the peripheries and be tackled in a democratic and sensible manner. Wenger covers these boundary interactions and practices in his 1998 work, and explores them in further depth in his latest book (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2020).

It is argued that the major reason for communities of practice not working could be the result of excessive power interactions which hinder admission and participation. For example, in educational settings, methods of learning and teaching, possibly because of individual deep-seated philosophical preference, are often the areas of dispute (Trowler, 2009). However, it is because communities of practice have hierarchical structures (novices and old-timers) that power can be used to either enable or disable legitimate peripheral participation. Such differences between novices and old-timers can cause discord, but perhaps this is pragmatically necessary to enhance the authentic nature of the learning experience. There is an understandable degree of threat that novices present to old-timers, and indeed that threat could be posed by old-timers to novices:

Each threatens the fulfilment of the other's destiny, just as it is essential to it. Conflict is experienced and worked out through a shared everyday practice in which differing viewpoints and common stakes are in interplay. (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 116)

It is the perceived imbalance of the importance of the learning process between novices and old-timers that is also an area for concern. Lave and Wenger's work emphasises the significance of learning as a developmental process where the novice moves through increasing levels of participation. This focus on the novice mainly overlooks the learning of the more experienced old-timers; furthermore, it disregards the impact on the community of practice when old-timers are brought in from other communities (Fuller et al., 2005). The nurturing of true communities of practice, it is argued, is a problematic undertaking because it requires creating a structure and involves activities which need the shared agreement of those in the community (Collins et al., 2002). Also, Tyler (2009) questions the rationality of storytelling as advocated by Wenger (1998), as these stories may be based on emotion rather than reason. Furthermore, Olson contests that by using specific community-structured activities 'students often fail to grasp "the longer purpose" behind the local tasks' (Olson, 2007: 46). In fairness to both Lave and Wenger, they were aware that their socially situated learning theory did not include all the aspects and complexities involved in learning. Wenger later reflected that he 'did not make any sweeping claim that the assumptions that underlie my approach are incompatible with [those] other theories' (Wenger, 2009: 216). Despite the criticisms aimed at socially situated learning, there are many examples where Lave and Wenger's notions can be applied to enhance the learning experience.

## APPLYING LAVE AND WENGER IN THE CLASSROOM

The case for the use of a 'community' philosophy in learning and teaching is progressive and convincing. In her (2003) work *Teaching Community: A pedagogy of hope*, bell hooks appeals for a shared and social approach to learning which does not bolster the forces of the market, racism, sexism and elite educational systems. She contests that one of the hazards we face in our current educational systems is the demise of an attachment to the community. This is more than just being close to our colleagues and the learners we work with. It has wider implications in that we are in danger of a 'loss of a feeling of connection and closeness with the world beyond the academy' (hooks, 2003: xv). Applying socially situated learning in education systems which value target setting, accreditations and the advancement of individual achievement could be perceived as a problematic and challenging aspiration for teachers. This is particularly so for teachers in formal educational settings. Furthermore, Lave and Wenger stress 'that legitimate peripheral participation is not itself an educational form, much less a pedagogical strategy or teaching technique' (1991: 40). However, having developed an understanding of learning in communities of practice and the nature of legitimate peripheral participation gives teachers the opportunity to think about pedagogy in other ways and foster the use of group work, collaborative projects and social media. Before we explore this further, the central principle of situated learning is that:

Learners learn through interactive processes, which, when set in the context of learning communities, means interactions that are unthreatening, meaningful, challenging and enjoyable and thus learning is intrinsically motivating. (Collins et al., 2002: 149)

Previously, situated learning and communities of practice have been employed in a research context when exploring workplace learning. However, it is argued that communities of practice also function wherever people work together to develop their learning within a common area of interest, such as in university research seminar groups (Bartlett and Burton, 2016). Communities of practice are suitable for use in classrooms where teachers can explore the social environments in which their pupils learn. Furthermore, teachers can also use Lave and Wenger's ideas to reflect on their own practice within specific faculty teams or within the whole school or college to evaluate these communities of practice – whether they help or hinder their continuing professional development (Huddleston and Unwin, 2002). New staff members in schools learn through a form of joint enterprise with other more experienced staff, by talking through matters and sharing ideas and resources. This talking could include: the best ways of dealing with behaviour issues; how to access IT systems; the meaning of, and compliance with, school policies; and, possibly, socially accepted practices in the staffroom. This joint enterprise would also involve the more experienced staff sharing learning and teaching resources and their ideas about planning and assessment with new staff members.

New practitioners start their time in new schools in a peripheral position, and through time and by gaining increasing self-assurance and competence ultimately become fully fledged members of that community of practice within that particular school (Avis et al., 2010). Equally, if the new member is completing a temporary placement in the school as a trainee teacher, it is argued that that trainee will only ever be in a peripheral position within that school. The trainee is only a transient member of the community, as they will move on to other placements or on to a job as a newly qualified teacher. For this trainee, when they move to another school 'the process of learning will have to begin again to some extent as no community of practice is the same' (2010: 55).

Although socially situated learning has mainly been the domain of the researcher and applied to work-based learning, creating communities of practice in classrooms involving teachers, teaching assistants and pupils is possible. Even though there is an acknowledged difference between learning in work and learning in the formally taught environment of the classroom, the potential for communities of practice in classrooms is an exciting prospect. For example, Wenger's three characteristics could be applied as follows: a mutual agreement by employing group work and shared projects; joint enterprise which negotiates what learning is to take place; and finally, a shared repertoire and the use of agreed and authentic resources (Wenger, 1998). It is suggested that fostering such communities within

classrooms can be achieved in three particular ways – namely learning and teaching methods, assessment and IT.

Similar to the manner in which craft apprentices informally learn, teaching can comprise activities which are socially considered and planned, which in turn allow pupils to gain a mastery of skills and knowledge. In this way pupils can be supported to learn through working in groups where the pupils and the teachers and teaching assistants all work together to resolve tasks and problems, create a shared understanding of situations and communicate their findings and difficulties to the others in their community (Gredler, 2005). There is a case for combining different teaching practices or environments which foster situated learning; for example, using field trips to allow students to experience learning with practice in a real-life setting (Wallace, 2008). However, for these learning and teaching methods to function as part of a community of practice, activities need to be planned and agreed with the pupils and be of interest to them. It is also an opportunity for teaching staff to learn themselves by being a part of the planning and by being immersed in the learning and teaching process. Such immersion and involvement, it is suggested, possibly reveals that 'learning does not belong to individual persons, but to various conversations of which they are a part' (Smith, 2003).

These conversations can take place through e-learning in the form of blogs where pupils write reflections on their learning to share with others in their group. Pupils can communicate difficulties that they have encountered. Realising that other pupils are finding difficulties in understanding topics can also facilitate learning. Furthermore, blogs offer an informal method of writing and give a writer the option to air an individual commentary (Rai, 2008: 96). An example of the use of e-learning was a research project carried out regarding an arts-focused online community of practice of Australian home educators who shared their formal and informal arts learning experiences so they could learn from one another (Burke, 2019).

One possible obstacle to creating communities of practice in classrooms is the matter of assessment. Schools are involved in delivering an accredited curriculum which includes formally measuring the learning of an individual pupil. Assessment in this formal and individually focused context is at odds with the notion of socially situated learning where assessment 'is situationally contingent, rooted in local cultures and reliable and robust only in terms of assumptions, attitudes and values which are, in part at least, localised' (Trowler, 2009: 95). Nevertheless, it is argued that it is feasible – if somewhat problematic – for assessment to be adapted to be used in a socially situated manner in classrooms. What is suggested here is a pragmatic solution of a blend of a socially situated notion of assessment which would then lead to a more formal and summative method. The socially situated notion of assessment would involve a series of group activities where legitimate peripheral participation is evidenced through increasing levels of engagement and competence with the more experienced others. This then

becomes an acknowledged level of achievement by the community of pupils. Therefore, in this communal notion of assessment pupils see and value assessment as part of their learning and not as a final outcome (Avis et al., 2010). However, as previously recognised, formal methods of assessment are necessary in classrooms because they work in accredited, qualifications-based curricula. To conclude this section, Smith (2003) offers some overarching advice for educators on how they can enhance communities of practice in their settings. Firstly, educators should investigate, with learners, parents and other educators, how they can all fully participate. Secondly, educators should endeavour to extend the community with other regional schools and institutions.

#### OVERVIEW OF APPLICATION: IDEAS FOR LAVE AND WENGER'S SOCIALY SITUATED LEARNING

As discussed earlier, applying socially situated learning in formal educational settings can be somewhat problematic. This is particularly the case when learning comes within the limitations present in a set curriculum. However, there are aspects of the application of situated learning and communities of practice which could, with some caution, be employed in practice. The list of ideas below is offered for your consideration, and perhaps as points for discussion with colleagues.

- Encourage the use of interactive activities and group problem-solving tasks.
- Facilitate and promote the student and school staff voice in the planning of, and during, learning activities.
- Explore ways of developing collaborative ideas for staff development which involve experienced staff, newly qualified teachers and student teachers - and extend these to include other schools and educational settings.
- Foster the use of knowledge and learning blogs.
- Try to create (where possible) a non-threatening environment where group/peer assessment is used as a developmental tool.
- Consider using real-world learning environments, such as field trips, where students can experience specific authentic learning.
- Think about incorporating Wenger's (1998) three characteristics in your practice:
  - Mutual agreement
  - Joint enterprise
  - Shared repertoire.

## SUMMARY

Lave and Wenger's work challenged the traditional notion of learning and teaching. For them learning was a shared social experience rather than the process of individuals passively gaining knowledge. Neither was learning necessarily the result of teaching. Their socially situated learning theory offered an alternative view in which interaction, culture and politics were significant elements for learning in communities of practice. The stimulus for their seminal work, *Situated Learning: Legitimate peripheral participation* (1991), was a desire to discover how craft apprentices learned new knowledge and skills without necessarily being part of a formal training process. Their text drew from research into the learning of four types of craft apprenticeships and also from non-drinking alcoholics from AA. They argued that the learning in these circumstances was considerably more complex than 'learning by doing'. Socially situated learning was through a process of legitimate peripheral participation, where learners gradually become more competent in their mastery of skills and knowledge. This increase in competence is gained from learning from more experienced members of the community of practice.

Although there is a strong argument for linking Lave and Wenger's socially situated learning with the works of other educational thinkers such as Vygotsky and Bruner, there are subtle differences. Vygotsky and Bruner's ideas were from a social constructivist standpoint where the purpose of learning was to gain non-specific knowledge and skills. Conversely, Lave and Wenger's notion was that communities of practice engage in particular shared activities with an exclusive purpose. It is this shared purpose in becoming a more adept member of a particular community of practice which Wenger's *Communities of Practice: Learning, meaning and identity* (1998) explored in greater depth. In this work he suggested there were three essential characteristics in true communities of practice, which were mutual agreement, joint enterprise and a shared repertoire. Moreover, the components of successful socially situated learning were meaning, practice community and identity (Wenger, 1998). There are also links with a number of other educational thinkers which have been explored, including those associated with the concept of apprenticeship such as Barak Rosenshine and Guy Claxton.

Lave and Wenger's ideas have received a fair amount of criticism. These criticisms have been with regard to their relevance in modern complex organisations, concerns over aspects of power and consensus, and the relationships between novices and old-timers. The need for shared agreement from those members of the community can also be a problematic undertaking. Nevertheless, socially situated learning and communities of practice have practical applications, particularly in work-based learning but also in classroom learning. In work-based learning there is a naturally shared identity and belonging to a specific professional or skill role. It is acknowledged that applying Lave and Wenger's ideas in a classroom environment might be

a more challenging prospect. However, the use of shared group and project work, socially reflective blogs and a sensitive approach to assessment can enable socially situated learning to prosper in classrooms.

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## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

### **Apprenticeship**

A different notion from the traditional assumptions regarding the meaning of apprenticeships. This concept involves social interaction where the process of learning becomes increasingly complex. This is not just a routine and mechanistic process where the learner copies the actions of a master, rather learning through apprenticeship is one of legitimate peripheral participation (see below).

### **Communities of practice**

A concept which contends that interactive social commitment is crucial in how people learn and form their distinctiveness. Participants learn how to fit in and how they can influence the changing nature of their community; they progress from a novice to a full member of the community. Communities of practice can be present in formal or informal groups, and they have three essential characteristics: mutual engagement, joint enterprise and a shared repertoire.

### **Legitimate peripheral participation**

Where learners involve themselves in communities with other more experienced practitioners to develop their skills and knowledge. In doing so learners progressively become more proficient in advancing their mastery, until ultimately they become fully fledged members of their community of practice.

### **Situated learning**

The process of being involved in a community of practice (see above). The notion that learning takes place within the framework of a community's shared experience during day-to-day living; the social, economic, political and cultural experiences of the community of practice are key. Knowledge and skills are seen as being a shared acquisition, and an emphasis on the fostering of relationships and a focus on a shared purpose are seen as crucial.

### **Situatedness**

A term which describes the link between the traditional notion of apprenticeship and the theory of situated learning. Situatedness is enhanced when legitimate peripheral participation is accepted and welcomed by the whole community.



## FURTHER READING

Carr, D. (2003) *Making Sense of Education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Chapter 12 – ‘Community, identity and cultural inheritance’ – offers an exploration of the philosophical complexities and problems involved with educational communitarianism.

Lave, J. (2009) The practice of learning. In: Illeris, K. (ed.) *Contemporary Theories of Learning: Learning theorists ... in their own words*. Abingdon: Routledge.

This is a replication of the introductory chapter of the 1993 book Lave co-edited with Seth Chaiklin, *Understanding Practice: Perspectives on activity and context*, which further highlights her ideas of social cognition in everyday situations.

Rogoff, B. (1990) *Apprenticeship in Thinking: Cognitive development in social context*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

An exploration of how children develop their thinking as they interact with adults and other children.

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