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A social theory of learning

Our institutions, to the extent that they address issues of learning explicitly, are largely based on the assumption that learning is an individual process, that it 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. Hence we arrange classrooms where students – free from the distractions of their participation in the outside world – can pay attention to a teacher or focus on exercises. We design computer-based training programs that walk students through individualized sessions covering reams of information and drill practice. To assess learning we use tests with which students struggle in one-on-one combat, where knowledge must be demonstrated out of context, and where collaborating is considered cheating. As a result, much of our institutionalized teaching and training is perceived by would-be learners as irrelevant, and most of us come out of this treatment feeling that learning is boring and arduous, and that we are not really cut out for it.

So, what if we adopted a different perspective, one that placed learning in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world? What if we assumed that learning is as much a part of our human nature as eating or sleeping, that it is both life-sustaining and inevitable, and that – given a chance – we are quite good at it? And what if, in addition, we assumed that learning is, in its essence, a fundamentally social phenomenon, reflecting our own deeply social nature as human beings capable of knowing? What kind of understanding would such a perspective yield on how learning takes place and on what is required to support it? In this book, I will try to develop such a perspective.

A conceptual perspective: theory and practice

There are many different kinds of learning theory. Each emphasizes different aspects of learning, and each is therefore useful for
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different purposes. To some extent these differences in emphasis reflect a deliberate focus on a slice of the multidimensional problem of learning, and to some extent they reflect more fundamental differences in assumptions about the nature of knowledge, knowing, and knowers, and consequently about what matters in learning. (For those who are interested, the first note lists a number of such theories with a brief description of their focus.)

The kind of social theory of learning I propose is not a replacement for other theories of learning that address different aspects of the problem. But it does have its own set of assumptions and its own focus. Within this context, it does constitute a coherent level of analysis; it does yield a conceptual framework from which to derive a consistent set of general principles and recommendations for understanding and enabling learning.

My assumptions as to what matters about learning and as to the nature of knowledge, knowing, and knowers can be succinctly summarized as follows. I start with four premises.

1) We are social beings. Far from being trivially true, this fact is a central aspect of learning.

2) Knowledge is a matter of competence with respect to valued enterprises — such as singing in tune, discovering scientific facts, fixing machines, writing poetry, being convivial, growing up as a boy or a girl, and so forth.

3) Knowing is a matter of participating in the pursuit of such enterprises, that is, of active engagement in the world.

4) Meaning — our ability to experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful — is ultimately what learning is to produce.

As a reflection of these assumptions, the primary focus of this theory is on learning as social participation. Participation here 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. Participating in a playground clique or in a work team, for instance, is both a kind of action and a form of belonging. Such participation shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do.

A social theory of learning must therefore integrate the components necessary to characterize social participation as a process of learning.
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and of knowing. These components, shown in Figure 0.1, include the following.

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 our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognizable 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.

Clearly, these elements are deeply interconnected and mutually defining. In fact, looking at Figure 0.1, you could switch any of the four peripheral components with learning, place it in the center as the primary focus, and the figure would still make sense.

Therefore, when I use the concept of “community of practice” in the title of this book, I really use it as a point of entry into a broader conceptual framework of which it is a constitutive element. The analytical
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power of the concept lies precisely in that it integrates the components of Figure 0.1 while referring to a familiar experience.

Communities of practice are everywhere

We all belong to communities of practice. At home, at work, at school, in our hobbies — we belong to several communities of practice at any given time. And the communities of practice to which we belong change over the course of our lives. In fact, communities of practice are everywhere.

Families struggle to establish an habitable way of life. They develop their own practices, routines, rituals, artifacts, symbols, conventions, stories, and histories. Family members hate each other and they love each other; they agree and they disagree. They do what it takes to keep going. Even when families fall apart, members create ways of dealing with each other. Surviving together is an important enterprise, whether surviving consists in the search for food and shelter or in the quest for a viable identity.

Workers organize their lives with their immediate colleagues and customers to get their jobs done. In doing so, they develop or preserve a sense of themselves they can live with, have some fun, and fulfill the requirements of their employers and clients. No matter what their official job description may be, they create a practice to do what needs to be done. Although workers may be contractually employed by a large institution, in day-to-day practice they work with — and, in a sense, for — a much smaller set of people and communities.

Students go to school and, as they come together to deal in their own fashion with the agenda of the imposing institution and the unsettling mysteries of youth, communities of practice sprout everywhere — in the classroom as well as on the playground, officially or in the cracks. And in spite of curriculum, discipline, and exhortation, the learning that is most personally transformative turns out to be the learning that involves membership in these communities of practice.

In garages, bands rehearse the same songs for yet another wedding gig. In attics, ham radio enthusiasts become part of worldwide clusters of communicators. In the back rooms of churches, recovering alcoholics go to their weekly meetings to find the courage to remain sober. In laboratories, scientists correspond with colleagues, near and far, in order to advance their inquiries. Across a worldwide web of computers,
people congregate in virtual spaces and develop shared ways of pursuing their common interests. In offices, computer users count on each other to cope with the intricacies of obscure systems. In neighborhoods, youths gang together to configure their life on the street and their sense of themselves.

Communities of practice are an integral part of our daily lives. They are so informal and so pervasive that they rarely come into explicit focus, but for the same reasons they are also quite familiar. Although the term may be new, the experience is not. Most communities of practice do not have a name and do not issue membership cards. Yet, if we care to consider our own life from that perspective for a moment, we can all construct a fairly good picture of the communities of practice we belong to now, those we belonged to in the past, and those we would like to belong to in the future. We also have a fairly good idea of who belongs to our communities of practice and why, even though membership is rarely made explicit on a roster or a checklist of qualifying criteria. Furthermore, we can probably distinguish a few communities of practice in which we are core members from a larger number of communities in which we have a more peripheral kind of membership.

In all these ways, the concept of community of practice is not unfamiliar. By exploring it more systematically in this book, I mean only to sharpen it, to make it more useful as a thinking tool. Toward this end, its familiarity will serve me well. Articulating a familiar phenomenon is a chance to push our intuitions: to deepen and expand them, to examine and rethink them. The perspective that results is not foreign, yet it can shed new light on our world. In this sense, the concept of community of practice is neither new nor old. It has both the eye-opening character of novelty and the forgotten familiarity of obviousness – but perhaps that is the mark of our most useful insights.

Rethinking learning

As I will argue in more detail throughout this book, placing the focus on participation has broad implications for what it takes to understand and support learning.

- **For individuals**, it means that learning is an issue of engaging in and contributing to the practices of their communities.
- **For communities**, it means that learning is an issue of refining their practice and ensuring new generations of members.
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- For organizations, it means that learning is an issue of sustaining the interconnected communities of practice through which an organization knows what it knows and thus becomes effective and valuable as an organization.

Learning in this sense is not a separate activity. It is not something we do when we do nothing else or stop doing when we do something else. There are times in our lives when learning is intensified: when situations shake our sense of familiarity, when we are challenged beyond our ability to respond, when we wish to engage in new practices and seek to join new communities. There are also times when society explicitly places us in situations where the issue of learning becomes problematic and requires our focus: we attend classes, memorize, take exams, and receive a diploma. And there are times when learning gels: an infant utters a first word, we have a sudden insight when someone’s remark provides a missing link, we are finally recognized as a full member of a community. But situations that bring learning into focus are not necessarily those in which we learn most, or most deeply. The events of learning we can point to are perhaps more like volcanic eruptions whose fiery bursts reveal for one dramatic moment the ongoing labor of the earth. Learning is something we can assume — whether we see it or not, whether we like the way it goes or not, whether what we are learning is to repeat the past or to shake it off. Even failing to learn what is expected in a given situation usually involves learning something else instead.

For many of us, the concept of learning immediately conjures up images of classrooms, training sessions, teachers, textbooks, homework, and exercises. Yet in our experience, learning is an integral part of our everyday lives. It is part of our participation in our communities and organizations. The problem is not that we do not know this, but rather that we do not have very systematic ways of talking about this familiar experience. Even though the topic of this book covers mostly things that everybody knows in some ways, having a systematic vocabulary to talk about it does make a difference. An adequate vocabulary is important because the concepts we use to make sense of the world direct both our perception and our actions. We pay attention to what we expect to see, we hear what we can place in our understanding, and we act according to our world views.

Although learning can be assumed to take place, modern societies have come to see it as a topic of concern — in all sorts of ways and for
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a host of different reasons. We develop national curriculums, ambitious corporate training programs, complex schooling systems. We wish to cause learning, to take charge of it, direct it, accelerate it, demand it, or even simply stop getting in the way of it. In any case, we want to do something about it. Therefore, our perspectives on learning matter: what we think about learning influences where we recognize learning, as well as what we do when we decide that we must do something about it – as individuals, as communities, and as organizations.

If we proceed without reflecting on our fundamental assumptions about the nature of learning, we run an increasing risk that our conceptions will have misleading ramifications. In a world that is changing and becoming more complexly interconnected at an accelerating pace, concerns about learning are certainly justified. But perhaps more than learning itself, it is our conception of learning that needs urgent attention when we choose to meddle with it on the scale on which we do today. Indeed, the more we concern ourselves with any kind of design, the more profound are the effects of our discourses on the topic we want to address. The farther you aim, the more an initial error matters. As we become more ambitious in attempts to organize our lives and our environment, the implications of our perspectives, theories, and beliefs extend further. As we take more responsibility for our future on larger and larger scales, it becomes more imperative that we reflect on the perspectives that inform our enterprises. A key implication of our attempts to organize learning is that we must become reflective with regard to our own discourses of learning and to their effects on the ways we design for learning. By proposing a framework that considers learning in social terms, I hope to contribute to this urgent need for reflection and rethinking.

The practicality of theory

A perspective is not a recipe; it does not tell you just what to do. Rather, it acts as a guide about what to pay attention to, what difficulties to expect, and how to approach problems.

- If we believe, for instance, that knowledge consists of pieces of information explicitly stored in the brain, then it makes sense to package this information in well-designed units, to assemble prospective recipients of this information in a classroom where they are perfectly still and isolated from any distraction, and to deliver this information
to them as succinctly and articulately as possible. From that perspective, what has come to stand for the epitome of a learning event makes sense: a teacher lecturing a class, whether in a school, in a corporate training center, or in the back room of a library.

But if we believe that information stored in explicit ways is only a small part of knowing, and that knowing involves primarily active participation in social communities, then the traditional format does not look so productive. What does look promising are inventive ways of engaging students in meaningful practices, of providing access to resources that enhance their participation, of opening their horizons so they can put themselves on learning trajectories they can identify with, and of involving them in actions, discussions, and reflections that make a difference to the communities that they value.

• Similarly, if we believe that productive people in organizations are the diligent implementors of organizational processes and that the key to organizational performance is therefore the definition of increasingly more efficient and detailed processes by which people’s actions are prescribed, then it makes sense to engineer and re-engineer these processes in abstract ways and then roll them out for implementation.

But if we believe that people in organizations contribute to organizational goals by participating inventively in practices that can never be fully captured by institutionalized processes, then we will minimize prescription, suspecting that too much of it discourages the very inventiveness that makes practices effective. We will have to make sure that our organizations are contexts within which the communities that develop these practices may prosper. We will have to value the work of community building and make sure that participants have access to the resources necessary to learn what they need to learn in order to take actions and make decisions that fully engage their own knowability.

If all this seems like common sense, then we must ask ourselves why our institutions so often seem, not merely to fail to bring about these outcomes, but to work against them with a relentless zeal. Of course, some of the blame can justifiably be attributed to conflicts of interest, power struggles, and even human wickedness. But that is too simple an answer, and unnecessarily pessimistic. We must also remember that our institutions are designs and that our designs are hostage to our understanding, perspectives, and theories. In this sense, our theories
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are very practical because they frame not just the ways we act, but also – and perhaps most importantly when design involves social systems – the ways we justify our actions to ourselves and to each other. In an institutional context, it is difficult to act without justifying your actions in the discourse of the institution.

A social theory of learning is therefore not exclusively an academic enterprise. While its perspective can indeed inform our academic investigations, it is also relevant to our daily actions, our policies, and the technical, organizational, and educational systems we design. A new conceptual framework for thinking about learning is thus of value not only to theorists but to all of us – teachers, students, parents, youths, spouses, health practitioners, patients, managers, workers, policy makers, citizens – who in one way or another must take steps to foster learning (our own and that of others) in our relationships, our communities, and our organizations. In this spirit, this book is written with both the theoretician and the practitioner in mind.

Intellectual context

Because I am trying to serve multiple audiences, I will endeavor to propose a synthetic perspective rather than to enter deeply into the arguments, technicalities, and controversies of any one academic community. In fact, whenever I make references to the literature covering such debates, I will do so in the notes. It is still useful, however, to spend a few paragraphs outlining the intellectual traditions that have influenced my thinking, whose influence I have tried to weave together, and to which I hope this work will make some contributions. If you are not interested, skipping this section will not impair your ability to follow my argument.

In an earlier book, anthropologist Jean Lave and I tried to distill – from a number of ethnographic studies of apprenticeship – what such studies might contribute to a general theory of learning. Our purpose was to articulate what it was about apprenticeship that seemed so compelling as a learning process. Toward this end, we used the concept of legitimate peripheral participation to characterize learning. We wanted to broaden the traditional connotations of the concept of apprenticeship – from a master/student or mentor/mentee relationship to one of changing participation and identity transformation in a community of practice. The concepts of identity and community of practice were thus