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Situated Learning

Legitimate Peripheral Participation

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*It occurred to us at the same moment to dedicate this book to
each other. We do so as a celebration of an extraordinarily
happy collaboration, in which we experienced many of the things
we were writing about.*

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Jean Lave
Etienne Wenger

Legitimate Peripheral Participation

Legitimate Peripheral Participation

Learning viewed as situated activity has as its central defining characteristic a process that we call *legitimate peripheral participation*. By this we mean to draw attention to the point that learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community. "Legitimate peripheral participation" provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. It concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice. A person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice. This social process includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills.

In order to explain our interest in the concept of legitimate peripheral participation, we will try to convey a sense of the perspectives that it opens and the kinds of questions that it raises. A good way to start is to outline the history of the concept as it has become increasingly central to our thinking about issues of learning. Our initial intention in writing what has gradually evolved into this book was to rescue the idea of *apprenticeship*. In 1988, notions about apprenticeship were flying around the halls of the Institute for Research on Learning, acting as a token of solidarity and as a focus for discussions on the nature of learning. We and our colleagues had begun to talk about learners as apprentices, about teachers and computers as masters, and about cognitive apprenticeship, apprenticeship learning, and even life as apprenticeship. It was evident that no one was certain what the term meant. Further-

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more, it was understood to be a synonym for *situated learning*, about which we were equally uncertain. Resort to one did not clarify the other. Apprenticeship had become yet another panacea for a broad spectrum of learning-research problems, and it was in danger of becoming meaningless.

Other considerations motivated this work as well. Our own earlier work on craft apprenticeship in West Africa, on intelligent tutoring systems, and on the cultural transparency of technology seemed relevant and at the same time insufficient for the development of an adequate theory of learning, giving us an urgent sense that we needed such a theory. Indeed, our central ideas took shape as we came to see that the most interesting features both of apprenticeship and of "glass-box" approaches to the development and understanding of technology could be characterized – and analyzed – as legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice.

The notion that learning through apprenticeship was a matter of legitimate peripheral participation arose first in research on craft apprenticeship among Vai and Gola tailors in Liberia (Lave, in preparation). In that context it was simply an observation about the tailors' apprentices within an analysis addressing questions of how apprentices might engage in a common, structured pattern of learning experiences without being taught, examined, or reduced to mechanical copiers of everyday tailoring tasks, and of how they become, with remarkably few exceptions, skilled and respected master tailors. It was difficult, however, to separate the historically and culturally specific circumstances that made Vai and Gola apprenticeship both effective and benign as a form of education from the critique of schooling and school practices that this inevitably suggested, or from a more general theory of situated learning.

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This added to the general confusion that encouraged us to undertake this project.

Over the past two years we have attempted to clarify the confusion. Two moments in that process were especially important. To begin with, the uses of "apprenticeship" in cognitive and educational research were largely metaphorical, even though apprenticeship as an actual educational form clearly had a long and varied train of historically and culturally specific realizations. We gradually became convinced that we needed to reexamine the relationship between the "apprenticeship" of speculation and historical forms of apprenticeship. This led us to insist on the distinction between our theoretical framework for analyzing educational forms and specific historical instances of apprenticeship. This in turn led us to explore learning as "situated learning."

Second, this conception of situated learning clearly was more encompassing in intent than conventional notions of "learning *in situ*" or "learning by doing" for which it was used as a rough equivalent. But, to articulate this intuition usefully, we needed a better characterization of "situatedness" as a theoretical perspective. The attempt to clarify the concept of situated learning led to critical concerns about the theory and to further revisions that resulted in the move to our present view that learning is an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice. We have tried to capture this new view under the rubric of legitimate peripheral participation.

Discussing each shift in turn may help to clarify our reasons for coming to characterize learning as legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice.

FROM APPRENTICESHIP TO SITUATED LEARNING

Fashioning a firm distinction between historical *forms* of apprenticeship and situated learning as a historical-cultural *theory* required that we stop trying to use empirical cases of apprenticeship as a lens through which to view all forms of learning. On these grounds we started to reconsider the forms of apprenticeship with which we were most familiar as models of effective learning in the context of a broader theoretical goal. Nevertheless, specific cases of apprenticeship were of vital interest in the process of developing and exemplifying a theory of situated learning and we thus continued to use some of these studies as resources in working out our ideas. We might equally have turned to studies of socialization; children are, after all, quintessentially legitimate peripheral participants in adult social worlds. But various forms of apprenticeship seemed to capture very well our interest in learning in situated ways – in the transformative possibilities of being and becoming complex, full cultural-historical participants in the world – and it would be difficult to think of a more apt range of social practices for this purpose.

The distinction between historical cases of apprenticeship and a theory of situated learning was strengthened as we developed a more comprehensive view of different approaches to situatedness. Existing confusion over the meaning of situated learning and, more generally, situated activity resulted from differing interpretations of the concept. On some occasions “situated” seemed to mean merely that some of people’s thoughts and actions were located in space and time. On other occasions, it seemed to mean that thought and action were social only in the narrow sense that they involved other people, or that they were immediately dependent for meaning on

the social setting that occasioned them. These types of interpretations, akin to naive views of indexicality, usually took some activities to be situated and some not.

In the concept of situated activity we were developing, however, the situatedness of activity appeared to be anything but a simple empirical attribute of everyday activity or a corrective to conventional pessimism about informal, experience-based learning. Instead, it took on the proportions of a general theoretical perspective, the basis of claims about the relational character of knowledge and learning, about the negotiated character of meaning, and about the concerned (engaged, dilemma-driven) nature of learning activity for the people involved. That perspective meant that there is no activity that is not situated. It implied emphasis on comprehensive understanding involving the whole person rather than “receiving” a body of factual knowledge about the world; on activity in and with the world; and on the view that agent, activity, and the world mutually constitute each other.

We have discovered that this last conception of situated activity and situated learning, which has gradually emerged in our understanding, frequently generates resistance, for it seems to carry with it connotations of parochialism, particularity, and the limitations of a given time and task. This misinterpretation of situated learning requires comment. (Our own objections to theorizing in terms of situated learning are somewhat different. These will become clearer shortly.) The first point to consider is that **even so-called general knowledge only has power in specific circumstances.** Generality is often associated with abstract representations, with decontextualization. But abstract representations are meaningless unless they can be made specific to the situation at hand. Moreover, the formation or acquisition of an abstract principle is itself a specific event in

specific circumstances. Knowing a general rule by itself in no way assures that any generality it may carry is enabled in the specific circumstances in which it is relevant. In this sense, any "power of abstraction" is thoroughly situated, in the lives of persons and in the culture that makes it possible. On the other hand, the world carries its own structure so that specificity always implies generality (and in this sense generality is not to be assimilated to abstractness): That is why stories can be so powerful in conveying ideas, often more so than an articulation of the idea itself. What is called general knowledge is not privileged with respect to other "kinds" of knowledge. It too can be gained only in specific circumstances. And it too must be brought into play in specific circumstances. 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.

FROM SITUATED LEARNING TO LEGITIMATE
PERIPHERAL PARTICIPATION

This brings us to the second shift in perspective that led us to explore learning as legitimate peripheral participation. The notion of situated learning now appears to be a transitory concept, a bridge, between a view according to which cognitive processes (and thus learning) are primary and a view according to which social practice is the primary, generative phenomenon, and learning is one of its characteristics. There is a significant contrast between a theory of learning in which practice (in a narrow, replicative sense) is subsumed within processes of learning and one in which learning is taken to be an integral

aspect of practice (in a historical, generative sense). In our view, learning is not merely situated in practice – as if it were some independently reifiable process that just happened to be located somewhere; learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world. The problem – and the central preoccupation of this monograph – is to translate this into a specific analytic approach to learning. Legitimate peripheral participation is proposed as a descriptor of engagement in social practice that entails learning as an integral constituent.

Before proceeding with a discussion of the analytic questions involved in a social practice theory of learning, we need to discuss our choices of terms and the issues that they reflect, in order to clarify our conception of legitimate peripheral participation. Its composite character, and the fact that it is not difficult to propose a contrary for each of its components, may be misleading. It seems all too natural to decompose it into a set of three contrasting pairs: legitimate versus illegitimate, peripheral versus central, participation versus nonparticipation. But we intend for the concept to be taken as a whole. Each of its aspects is indispensable in defining the others and cannot be considered in isolation. Its constituents contribute inseparable aspects whose combinations create a landscape – shapes, degrees, textures – of community membership.

Thus, in the terms proposed here there may very well be no such thing as an "illegitimate peripheral participant." The form that the legitimacy of participation takes is a defining characteristic of ways of belonging, and is therefore not only a crucial condition for learning, but a constitutive element of its content. Similarly, with regard to "peripherality" there may well be no such simple thing as "central participation" in a community of practice. Peripherality suggests that there are

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multiple, varied, more- or less-engaged and -inclusive ways of being located in the fields of participation defined by a community. Peripheral participation is about being located in the social world. *Changing* locations and perspectives are part of actors' learning trajectories, developing identities, and forms of membership.

Furthermore, legitimate peripherality is a complex notion, implicated in social structures involving relations of power. As a place in which one moves toward more-intensive participation, peripherality is an empowering position. As a place in which one is kept from participating more fully – often legitimately, from the broader perspective of society at large – it is a disempowering position. Beyond that, legitimate peripherality can be a position at the articulation of related communities. In this sense, it can itself be a source of power or powerlessness, in affording or preventing articulation and interchange among communities of practice. The ambiguous potentialities of legitimate peripherality reflect the concept's pivotal role in providing access to a nexus of relations otherwise not perceived as connected.

Given the complex, differentiated nature of communities, it seems important not to reduce the end point of centripetal participation in a community of practice to a uniform or univocal "center," or to a linear notion of skill acquisition. There is no place in a community of practice designated "the periphery," and, most emphatically, it has no single core or center. *Central participation* would imply that there is a center (physical, political, or metaphorical) to a community with respect to an individual's "place" in it. *Complete participation* would suggest a closed domain of knowledge or collective practice for which there might be measurable degrees of "acquisition" by newcomers. We have chosen to call that to which peripheral

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participation leads, *full participation*. Full participation is intended to do justice to the diversity of relations involved in varying forms of community membership.

Full participation, however, stands in contrast to only one aspect of the concept of peripherality as we see it: It places the emphasis on what partial participation is not, or not yet. In our usage, *peripherality* is also a *positive* term, whose most salient conceptual antonyms are *unrelatedness* or *irrelevance* to ongoing activity. The partial participation of newcomers is by no means "disconnected" from the practice of interest. Furthermore, it is also a dynamic concept. In this sense, peripherality, when it is enabled, suggests an opening, a way of gaining access to sources for understanding through growing involvement. The ambiguity inherent in peripheral participation must then be connected to issues of legitimacy, of the social organization of and control over resources, if it is to gain its full analytical potential.

AN ANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE ON LEARNING

With the first shift in the development of this project we have tried to establish that our historical-cultural theory of learning should not be merely an abstracted generalization of the concrete cases of apprenticeship – or any other educational form. Further, coming to see that a theory of situated activity challenges the very meaning of abstraction and/or generalization has led us to reject conventional readings of the generalizability and/or abstraction of "knowledge." Arguing in favor of a shift away from a theory of situated activity in which learning is reified as one kind of activity, and toward a theory of social

practice in which learning is viewed as an aspect of all activity, has led us to consider how we are to think about our own practice. And this has revealed a dilemma: How can we purport to be working out a *theoretical conception* of learning without, in fact, engaging in just the project of abstraction rejected above?

There are several classical dualist oppositions that in many contexts are treated as synonymous, or nearly so: abstract-concrete; general-particular; theory about the world, and the world so described. Theory is assumed to be general and abstract, the world, concrete and particular. But in the Marxist historical tradition that underpins social practice theory these terms take on different relations with each other and different meanings. They do so as part of a general method of social analysis. This method does not deny that there is a concrete world, which is ordinarily perceived as some collection of particularities, just as it is possible to invent simple, thin, abstract theoretical propositions about it. But these two possibilities are not considered as the two poles of interest. Instead, both of them offer points of departure for starting to explore and produce an understanding of multiply determined, diversely unified – that is, complexly concrete – historical processes, of which particularities (including initial theories) are the result (Marx 1857; Hall 1973; Ilyenkov 1977). The theorist is trying to recapture those relations in an analytic way that turns the apparently “natural” categories and forms of social life into challenges to our understanding of how they are (historically and culturally) produced and reproduced. The goal, in Marx’s memorable phrase, is to “ascend (from both the particular and the abstract) to the concrete.”

It may now be clearer why it is not appropriate to treat legitimate peripheral participation as a mere distillation of ap-

prenticeship, an abstracting process of generalizing from examples of apprenticeship. (Indeed, turned onto apprenticeship, the concept should provide the same analytical leverage as it would for any other educational form.) **Our theorizing about legitimate peripheral participation thus is not intended as abstraction, but as an attempt to explore its concrete relations.** To think about a concept like legitimate peripheral participation in this way is to argue that its theoretical significance derives from the richness of its interconnections: in historical terms, through time and across cultures. It may convey better what we mean by a historically, culturally concrete “concept” to describe legitimate peripheral participation as an “analytical perspective.” We use these two terms interchangeably hereafter.

WITH LEGITIMATE PERIPHERAL PARTICIPATION

We do not talk here about schools in any substantial way, nor explore what our work has to say about schooling. Steering clear of the problem of school learning for the present was a conscious decision, which was not always easy to adhere to as the issue kept creeping into our discussions. But, although we mention schooling at various points, we have refrained from any systematic treatment of the subject. It is worth outlining our reasons for this restraint, in part because this may help clarify further the theoretical status of the concept of legitimate peripheral participation.

First, as we began to focus on legitimate peripheral participation, we wanted above all to take a fresh look at learning. Issues of learning and schooling seemed to have become too

deeply interrelated in our culture in general, both for purposes of our own exploration and the exposition of our ideas. More importantly, the organization of schooling as an educational form is predicated on claims that knowledge can be decontextualized, and yet schools themselves as social institutions and as places of learning constitute very specific contexts. Thus, analysis of school learning as situated requires a multilayered view of how knowing and learning are part of social practice – a major project in its own right. Last, but not least, pervasive claims concerning the sources of the effectiveness of schooling (in teaching, in the specialization of schooling in changing persons, in the special modes of inculcation for which schools are known) stand in contradiction with the situated perspective we have adopted. All this has meant that our discussions of schooling were often contrastive, even oppositional. But we did not want to define our thinking and build our theory primarily by contrast to the claims of any educational form, including schooling. We wanted to develop a view of learning that would stand on its own, reserving the analysis of schooling and other specific educational forms for the future.

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. We hope to make clear as we proceed that learning through legitimate peripheral participation takes place no matter which educational form provides a context for learning, or whether there is any intentional educational form at all. Indeed, this viewpoint makes a fundamental distinction between learning and intentional instruction. Such decoupling does not deny that learning can take place where there is teaching, but does not

take intentional instruction to be in itself the source or cause of learning, and thus does not blunt the claim that what gets learned is problematic with respect to what is taught. Undoubtedly, the analytical perspective of legitimate peripheral participation could – we hope that it will – inform educational endeavors by shedding a new light on learning processes, and by drawing attention to key aspects of learning experience that may be overlooked. But this is very different from attributing a prescriptive value to the concept of legitimate peripheral participation and from proposing ways of “implementing” or “operationalizing” it for educational purposes.

Even though we decided to set aside issues of schooling in this initial stage of our work, we are persuaded that rethinking schooling from the perspective afforded by legitimate peripheral participation will turn out to be a fruitful exercise. Such an analysis would raise questions about the place of schooling in the community at large in terms of possibilities for developing identities of mastery. These include questions of the relation of school practices to those of the communities in which the knowledge that schools are meant to “impart” is located, as well as issues concerning relations between the world of schooling and the world of adults more generally. Such a study would also raise questions about the social organization of schools themselves into communities of practice, both official and interstitial, with varied forms of membership. We would predict that such an investigation would afford a better context for determining what students learn and what they do not, and what it comes to mean for them, than would a study of the curriculum or of instructional practices.

Thinking about schooling in terms of legitimate peripheral participation is only one of several directions that seem promising for pursuing the analysis of contemporary and other his-

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torical forms of social practice in terms of legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice. There are central issues that are only touched upon in this monograph, and that need to be given more attention. The concept of "community of practice" is left largely as an intuitive notion, which serves a purpose here but which requires a more rigorous treatment. In particular, unequal relations of power must be included more systematically in our analysis. Hegemony over resources for learning and alienation from full participation are inherent in the shaping of the legitimacy and peripherality of participation in its historical realizations. It would be useful to understand better how these relations generate characteristically interstitial communities of practice and truncate possibilities for identities of mastery.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS MONOGRAPH

In this brief history we have tried to convey how and why the core concept of legitimate peripheral participation has taken on theoretical interest for us. In the next chapter we place this history in a broader theoretical context and investigate assumptions about learning; we contrast our own views to conventional views concerning internalization, the construction of identity, and the production of communities of practice. In Chapter 3, we present excerpts from five studies of apprenticeship, analyzing them as instances of learning through legitimate peripheral participation. These studies raise a series of issues: the relations between learning and pedagogy, the place of knowledge in practice, the importance of access to the learning potential of given settings, the uses of language in learning-in-

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practice, and the way in which knowledge takes on value for the learner in the fashioning of identities of full participation. Our discussion of these issues provokes an examination of the fundamental contradictions embodied in relations of legitimate peripheral participation, and of how such contradictions are involved in generating change (Chapter 4). In conclusion, we emphasize the significance of shifting the analytic focus from the individual as learner to learning as participation in the social world, and from the concept of cognitive process to the more encompassing view of social practice.