Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger – Community of Practice Theory

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Biographical Information

Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger are social learning theorists who established the learning theory of Communities of Practice in their pivotal book, Situated Learning Legitimate Peripheral Participation (1991). Both Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger have gone on to publish additional work deepening the knowledge around this learning concept. Jean Lave earned her doctorate in social anthropology from Harvard University in 1968, and is currently a social anthropologist at the University of California Berkeley. Lave was heavily influenced by John Dewey’s concepts around learning developing primarily from experience and social interaction. Other thinkers such as Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget also influenced the work of Lave. Lave followed up her initial work with Wenger with an additional work on communities of practice, titled: Understanding Practice; Perspectives on Activity and Context (1993). While the educational background of Jean Lave logically lead to her interest in the development of communities of practice, the educational background of Etienne Wenger was not so clearly linked.

Etienne Wenger received his Ph.D. in information and computer science from the University of California Irvine. He later joined the Institute for Research on Learning in Palo Alto, and is currently an independent consultant specializing in developing communities of practice within organizations. Wenger is also a co-founder and director of CPsquare, which he considers “a practitioner’s community on communities of practice.” Wenger has completed a couple of follow-up books to his initial work with Lave. In 1998 he published Communities of Practice, Learning, Meaning and Identity, and in 2002 he published Cultivating Communities of Practice, a Guide to Managing Knowledge.
Communities of Practice

Communities of practice are groups based on knowledge or learning that is gained through “spontaneous communities,” and centered on common interests and passions of a group where they learn and grow through their regular interaction within the community. There are a large number of communities of practice and people are generally involved in numerous different ones in their lives, including work, home, school, church, and social groups. Etienne Wenger (2007) identified the following three important elements that differentiate a community of practice from other communities or groups:

The domain – A community of practice is more than a group of friends or network of connections. It contains a specific domain of shared interest, and members share a commitment to the domain, and competence in the domain separates members from other people.

The communities – Members in a domain pursue their interest through joint conversations, activities, and shared information. Together they build relationships that allow and help them to learn from each other.

The practice – Members of a community of practice develop shared stories, resources, experiences, and ways of looking at and handling issues and problems. All members are practitioners in the community. A shared practice is built through time and interaction with other members of the community of practice.

A community of practice shares many attributes of what is often found in a strong corporate culture. These attributes include a shared vocabulary, documents, resources, stories, myths, and tools, which all add to the accumulated knowledge of the community. Learning in communities of practice is highly social, and learners are integrated into the community through
what Lave and Wenger (1990) termed, “Legitimate Peripheral Participation.” This refers to the actual integration process for beginners or novice members of the community. In this beginning stage, new members usually serve an apprenticeship and learn at the periphery of the community. As members increase competence through interactions, collaborations and engagement, they move from peripheral participation into full participation, and ultimately into expert or master status as depicted in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Figure 1. Model of a Community of Practice. This figure illustrates the stages of member integration into a community of practice.*

As an expert or “old-timer” members are often charged with the integrating and teaching the newer members, or apprentices. Lave and Wenger highlight their theory of “cognitive apprenticeship” by outlining their observations of several different apprenticeships (meat-cutters, non-drinking alcoholics in Alcoholics Anonymous, US Navy quartermasters, Yucatec midwives,
and Vai and Gola tailors). In each of the above examples there was a progressive acquisition and learning of skills as the participants moved from the apprenticeship stage towards expertise via everyday learning experiences from experts.

Clearly, in the United States much of the professional learning that takes place occurs via communities of learning, and incorporates some sort of apprenticeship to transfer knowledge. In fields as broad and diverse as medicine, law, and academia, and as specific as, plumbing, and contracting, tailored communities of practice and apprenticeships are well established forms of learning and knowledge transfer. The interesting fact is that as well as this systems works, and as integrated into our society as it is vocationally, communities of practice have never really been implemented extensively in the formal public education process in this country.

The slow or non-existent adoption of communities of learning is somewhat easy to understand and explain. First, public education is primarily structured around a standardized teaching curriculum, as opposed to a learning curriculum. In a teaching curriculum the teacher is the center of all instruction and learning, and is generally used to instruct novices or newcomers. On the other hand, a learning curriculum is learner-based and uses experiences and everyday interactions to build a base of knowledge within the learner. Moving away from a teaching-based curriculum, and towards a learner-based curriculum may make formal education institutions uneasy about their role and discount many of the practices they have built over a long period of time. Many recent researchers have suggested that this need not necessarily be the case, and have looked at ways to incorporate the principles identified by Lave and Wenger into formal education.
One such researcher is Barbara Rogoff who along with her colleagues (2001), looked at a progressive school in Salt Lake City where teachers, parents, and students all worked together to develop an approach to learning based on the foundations that learning occurs through interested participation with others. There are many other cases of progressive schools starting to take root around the country, but they are still very much in the minority. With all of the technology-based resources available today, it will be interesting to see how technology can be incorporated into communities of learning to engage learners in new and different ways.

**E-Learning Applications of Communities of Practice**

The advancement of technology has truly opened new avenues in both professional organizations, and formal education settings to expand the social, interactive, and experiential nature of communities of practice. While there are a plethora of opportunities for applying E-learning tools to communities of practice, this review will focus on two primary areas, social networking sites and simulation game tools. Both of these technologies have applicability to both the professional and educational fields.

One of the first E-learning types of applications to gain wide acceptance and availability was the social networking applications via the internet. The four largest and most popular social networking sites in North America are (in order of launch), My Space (2003), LinkedIn (2003), Facebook (2004), and Twitter (2006). Even though these sites are primarily used for social interactions between friends and informal groups, they do have the ability to connect groups with common shared interests, thus broadening and advancing communication and learning in communities of practice. Through the use of technology, these groups are no longer constrained by geography or time zones. Knowledge, learning techniques, stories, and advances, can be
shared with a community of practice in real time, anywhere in the world. Many geographically
dispersed people with common interests who would never have known each other, now work,
play, and interact together on a daily basis. These social networking sites also span both
education (Facebook was originally a college student social network), and professional
(LinkedIn is the most prominent of several professional social networking sites) domains. Social
and professional networking sites have tremendously increased the ability of groups of people in
communities of practice to interact more quickly and frequently. However, social networking
sites do not allow groups to interact as deeply or dynamically as can be achieved through
simulations.

Simulations such as social networking sites have the ability to span applications in both
the educational and professional settings. The advantages of simulations are that the
sophistication, complexity, and knowledge transfer capabilities of simulations far exceeds
anything that can be accomplished via social networking sites. Clark Aldrich, author of the book,
*The Complete Guide to Simulations and Serious Games: How the Most Valuable Content Will be
Created in the Age Beyond Gutenberg to Google* (2009), was recently quoted as saying,
“…because media today is linear, it forces a focus on passive “learning to know” skills rather
than active “learning to do” skills.” “Learning to do” skills are at the center of communities of
practice, and are also the primary advantage that simulations offer.

“Learning to do skills” are one of the most difficult things for current educators to
implement, due to the high priority of standardized-testing that permeates education today. Many
of today’s students have grown up with computer simulations and interactive games such as
SimCity and World of Warcraft (which has its’ own community of practice), that exemplify
learning to do skills in a highly interactive fashion. Since students are already seeking out this
type of engaging and interactive learning on their own, it makes sense to further incorporate their use into school curricula. While there are a number of off the shelf educational simulation games, at this point there are not enough to cover every core subject, and they do tend to be more expensive than linear learning materials like books. Never-the-less, if demand for these types of products increases, more of them will be manufactured, and prices will decrease.

The barriers to entry on the educational side are not as significant when looking at professional applications of simulations. Sherry Turkle, in her book, *Simulation and its Discontents*, uses multiple essays to describe the uses of simulations in a variety of settings, and the many advantages and disadvantages it offers in learning, interacting with, and modeling complex material. In addition, there are now many professional simulation software packages such as SimuLearn’s “Virtual Leader” that have become very common in managerial and leadership contexts. Many of these simulations are quite advanced and allow for both individual, and in some cases group interactions, that help build experiences and knowledge faster and easier than can be achieved with face-to-face sessions.

With all of the speed, efficiency, and reach advantages that technology offers, the ability to enhance interaction within communities of practice both educationally and professionally, has never shown more promise.
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