



## Review

# An examination of the construct of legitimate peripheral participation as a theoretical framework in literacy research



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## ABSTRACT

This review critically examines the use in literacy research of Lave and Wenger's (1991) construct of *legitimate peripheral participation* (LPP), a view of learning as participation by which newcomers adopt a group's ways, moving from periphery to the center of a practice. From a search through 10 literacy-relevant journals from 1991 to the present, we purposively selected 20 pieces that relied centrally on LPP and analyzed these for ways in which practice and apprenticeship were instantiated. Regarding practice, we inquired about legitimacy and engagement; regarding apprenticeship, we asked about the deployment of experts' attention and the cost of newcomers' mistakes. Using the benefit of the 20+ years since the original publication, our critique offers six principles to evaluate researchers' use of LPP and community of practice as constructs to describe learners' experience, and summarizes how some of our 20 studies made felicitous use of the constructs and others less so.

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## 1. Introduction

More than twenty years ago, [Lave and Wenger \(1991\)](#) published *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*, a seminal work that described learning as the product of novices being ushered into a practice by experts who provide varying degrees and qualities of support. Their book became “a rallying point for those seeking alternatives to the cognitive account” ([Billett, 2007](#), p. 55). Lave and Wenger used the term *legitimate peripheral participation* (LPP) to refer to what the newcomer, or novice, is doing while learning. Through its contribution, “(a)cquisition was replaced by participation as the key metaphor and mechanism of learning” ([Engeström, 2007](#), p. 43). The immediate acceptance of the theory and its meteoric ascendance as a new approach to learning is revealed in the numbers of citations when related terms and keywords were entered into Google Scholar on June 26, 2014: legitimate peripheral participation “about 141,000”; [Lave and Wenger \(1991\)](#) “about 37,800.” In this same search, the original book title showed that it was cited “38,373” times and is still garnering more than 1000 citations each year across many disciplines. The concept of LPP is attractive, then, almost 25 years later, in that it appears to have been widely hospitable to descriptions of an array of learning situations, even as it may have lost some feel of originality. In the interest of bounding our review, and because we see ourselves as literacy researchers, we selected articles from a literacy tradition, one of the several disciplines that has welcomed the construct as a productive metaphor for what happens when individuals develop such foundational skills. Its popularity in the field of literacy is underscored by the fact that citations to LPP in Google Scholar drop to “about 43,600” when *literacy* is added to the original search, still a large number.

However, the concept fascinates us, if only because of a worry we have about the spatial metaphor at its heart, of students being on the periphery of a practice, that sits crossly with our own views of students in classrooms. It is difficult to reconcile the central societal roles ascribed to schooling and children, and educational researchers’ focus on learning with the LPP model, in which experts and expertise are at the center of a “community of practice” and learners are on the periphery. When [Lave and Wenger \(1991\)](#) first defined *legitimate peripheral participation*, they immediately linked it with the concept of *community of practice*:

The concept of community of practice underlying the notion of legitimate peripheral participation, and hence of “knowledge” and its “location” in the lived-in world, is both crucial and subtle...A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice. A community of practice is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge, not least because it provides the interpretive support necessary for making sense of its heritage. (p. 98)

They then went on to locate *participation* as the crucial process of learning:

Thus, participation in the cultural practice in which any knowledge exists is an epistemological principle of learning. The social structure of this practice, its power relations, and its conditions for legitimacy define possibilities for learning (i.e., for legitimate peripheral participation). (p. 98)

With the advent of New Literacies studies ([New London Group, 1996](#)) come responsibilities to re-examine well-established notions of learning, communication, and practice in terms of their continued utility, given the new geographies/topographies, charted and uncharted, of 21st century literacy research. Thus, our purpose here was to consider ways in which the construct of *legitimate peripheral participation* has been used, and perhaps misused, by examining literacy studies that have relied centrally on LPP.

Before turning to our critique of key pieces that have made use of legitimate peripheral participation as an explanatory construct, we begin by examining the theory itself a bit more closely. [Lave and Wenger's \(1991\)](#) LPP theory shares similarities with, and in fact derives from [Vygotsky's \(1978\)](#) idea of *zone of proximal development*. In Vygotsky's analysis, learning occurs as a result of the relationship between more and less knowledgeable individuals; in the LPP framework, the emphasis is on apprentice and master. Lave and Wenger explained that learning occurs within communities where “learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world” (p. 35). They were careful to problematize their own terminology, pointing to the binaries their language invites: legitimate/illegitimate, peripheral/central, participation/marginalization. Moreover, they noted that relations in communities are necessarily inveigled with issues of power, thereby pointing to yet

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