



# Situated learning theory and the pedagogy of teacher education: Towards an integrative view of teacher behavior and teacher learning

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## ABSTRACT

Lave and Wenger have greatly influenced existing views of learning and teaching, but relatively little has been written about the implications for the understanding of teacher behavior and teacher learning, and for the pedagogy of teacher education. Based on their work, a three-level model of learning is used to analyze the friction between teacher behavior in practice and the wish to ground teachers' practices in theory. Supported by empirical data on teacher learning and brain research, this model reconciles the situated learning perspective with traditional cognitive theory, and leads to concrete implications for the pedagogy of teacher education.

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## 1. Introduction

In their thought-provoking book, [Lave and Wenger \(1991\)](#) introduced a specific view of learning, and new concepts such as legitimate peripheral participation, and situated learning. Their work has influenced many teacher educators and researchers, and as a logical consequence, it has opened up new perspectives on teaching. Hence, it is remarkable that their consequences for teaching and teacher education have hardly been fully analyzed in this journal, even though in several educational fields, for example e-learning, much progress has been made using analyses from a situated learning perspective (see e.g. [Ponti, Lindström, Dirckinck-Holmfeld, & Moeller Svendsen, 2004](#)).

The aim of the present article is to go straight to the heart of the question of what the Lave and Wenger perspective could mean to teacher educators' and researchers' understanding of teacher behavior and teacher learning, and to the pedagogy used in teacher education. Although this perspective was published more than 15 years ago already, today this question seems more urgent than ever. The reason is that, as [Grossman \(2008\)](#) argues, we are currently facing a crisis in teacher education, given the many research studies showing the disappointing impact of teacher education on teacher behavior and teacher learning. Already in the early 1980s, [Zeichner](#)

and [Tabachnik \(1981\)](#) noted that the effects of university teacher education were being "washed out" by school experiences. In the same period, the 'practice shock' phenomenon started to draw international attention, and many researchers from various countries demonstrated that teacher education graduates were facing severe problems trying to survive in the classroom, and were implementing little of what they had learnt during their professional preparation. For example, in a large-scale German study, [Müller-Fohrbrodt, Cloetta, and Dann \(1978\)](#) showed that novice teachers changed rapidly from an idealistic attitude towards a more custodial one. In a teacher education program at Linköping University, [Bergqvist \(2000\)](#) studied student teachers and their tutors, and found that, contrary to the curriculum goals, many student teachers had indeed acquired the techniques of carrying out a small scientific study, e.g. they had learnt how to find relevant literature, but they had not developed the critical scholarly attitude their program had aimed at.

Although initially many studies on the practice shock and the problems related to the induction into teaching were carried out from a somewhat local or national perspective, an extensive meta-study by [Wideen, Mayer-Smith, and Moon \(1998\)](#) led to the more general conclusion that the impact of teacher education on practice tends to be minimal. In a review of North-American research on teacher education, the AERA Panel on Research and Teacher Education ([Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005](#)) came to the conclusion there is no convincing evidence that teacher education really makes a difference. However, there are

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also other contrasting studies showing that teacher education based on specific pedagogies does have the potential to influence the practices of teachers (e.g. Brouwer & Korthagen, 2005; Day, 1999). It means that the picture may well be less negative than some researchers suggest. Nevertheless, we can conclude that to date there are at least some serious doubts about the effectiveness of teacher education in general. This means that, although at some institutions teacher education may be successful, new and promising views of learning and teaching may still insufficiently reach the schools. Many scholars have framed this problem in terms of a divide between theory and practice (e.g. Broekkamp & Van Hout-Wolters, 2007; Burkhardt & Schoenfeld, 2003; Kennedy, 1997; Robinson, 1998).

## 2. Views of knowledge

Several researchers have pointed to the underlying causes of the theory–practice divide. One important reason may be that for quite some time there has been a simplistic view of what goes on in teachers and teaching, caused by the fact that researchers often looked at teachers and schools from the outside, and not from what Anderson and Herr (1999) call an *insider perspective*, as is common in anthropological research. Those researchers who really went into classrooms, and used qualitative approaches with the “purpose to obtain a description of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena” (Kvale, 1996, p. 5), discovered that much of what was going on inside schools looked different from what university researchers or teacher educators would expect (see e.g. Bullough, 1989; Day, 1999). When going a step further than merely interviewing teachers about their work – with its inherent problem of reconstructing the process of meaning making from the perspective of the interviewees (cf. Kvale, 1996) – and taking a more anthropological stance in their research, this promoted a more profound understanding of teaching from the perspective of what Chaikin and Lave (1996, p. 378) call “societally significant practices”. For example, contrary to what many teacher educators had hoped, much of the learning taking place in student teachers appeared to have the characteristics of *apprenticeship learning*, and looked quite similar to what Lave saw happening in novices entering a community of Liberian tailors (Lave & Kvale, 1995), namely a subtle process of enculturation, shaped by language and implicit norms. In an ethnographic study, Beach (1995) demonstrated that political, economic, cultural and ideological factors play an important role in this process. In summary, observation of the reality of teaching as embedded in a societal and historical system (Chaikin & Lave, 1996, p. 18), opened up new ways of looking at teaching, and as a consequence, at teacher education.

This line of research has revealed differences between the nature of the knowledge existing in the minds of teachers that really helps them to act effectively, and the knowledge as it is taught in teacher education (see e.g. Fenstermacher, 1994; Kessels & Korthagen, 1996; Wubbels, 1992). Seen from the Lave and Wenger perspective, one could say that – even though everybody is currently talking about situated learning – many teacher educators seem to forget that educational knowledge cannot be simply ‘transmitted’ to teachers, and thus improve their actions. Lave and Wenger would argue that the opposite is true: learning emerges from our own actions in relation to those of others. Thus, the learning outcomes are socially constructed (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 95). Wenger (1998) states:

“Being alive as human beings means that we are constantly engaged in the pursuit of enterprises of all kinds, from ensuring our physical survival to seeking the most lofty pleasures. As we define these enterprises and engage in their pursuit together, we interact with each other and with the world and we tune our

relations with each other and with the world accordingly. In other words we learn.” (p. 45).

If we take Wenger’s quote seriously, it tells us that the learning processes taking place in student teachers is fundamentally different from those that many teacher educators seem to assume. Student teacher learning does not simply result from teaching them valuable educational theories, and does not result from the serial learning of concepts on a scale of growing complexity (Arnseth & Säljö, 2007; Derry, 2008). From an anthropological perspective, as proposed by Lave, we should view student teacher learning as being part of the process of participation in social practice, especially the social practice in the schools. As Marton (1996) puts it, with a wink to Descartes: “I experience, therefore I exist” From the Lave and Wenger perspective, we could say: “I experience, therefore I learn.” If we contrast this view with the traditional cognitive perspective, it implies nothing less than a paradigm shift, as DeCorte, Greer, and Verschaffel (1996) see it. Cobb and Bowers (1999) describe it as a radical move away from the idea that learning “entails the transportation of an [knowledge] item from one physical location to the other”.

Isn’t this somewhat confusing, though? Many of us have frequently had the experience of learning a lot from an inspiring teacher or teacher educator, whose lectures on theory opened our eyes, who helped us understand phenomena not understood before, or at least not so deeply. We may even remember a specific book that strongly boosted our own learning and changed our worldviews. How can we reconcile such experiences with the notions of situated learning and communities of practice? As Putnam and Borko (1997, p. 1254) say: “Explaining how transfer to new contexts does occur is an unresolved issue for proponents of a situated view of cognition.”

Summing up, we seem to be faced with an intriguing and unsolved theoretical question, namely how the situated learning perspective and the perspective of traditional cognitive theory can be reconciled. The objective of this article is to offer some building blocks towards answering this question, as well as the more practical question what such an integrated perspective could mean to the pedagogy of teacher education.

## 3. An integrative perspective

Cobb and Bowers (1999) argue that the different metaphors underlying situated learning and cognitive theory are incompatible. However, it is important to realize that they are incompatible in so far as they serve different functions. Situated learning theory tries to explain the role of embodied social learning, while cognitive theory aims at describing the characteristics of knowledge and knowledge development per se. Similar to a position defended by Bereiter (1997); Korthagen and Lagerwerf (1996) suggested that it is possible to integrate these two perspectives. They did so using a three-level model, which contributes to a better understanding of the relationship between theory and practice (see also Hoekstra, Beijjaard, Brekelmans, & Korthagen, 2007). Their perspective can be explained by using a metaphor described by Schön (1993) in relation to the well-known figure shown in Fig. 1:

“The gestalt figures are used ordinarily to show how “the same figure” may be seen in very different, incompatible ways. For example, in the well-known figure shown here some people see two profiles, others the vase. Usually, one can manage (after learning what is there to be seen) to move rapidly from one way of seeing the figure to the other. It is unusual to find someone who claims to be able to see both at once. Yet this, too, can be managed if one thinks of the figures as two profiles pressing their noses into a vase! It is this integrating image which makes it possible to bring together the two different ways of seeing the figure.” (p. 163).

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