



The three facets of knowledge: A critique of the practice-based learning theory

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ABSTRACT

The community of practice learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991) can be credited with establishing the social basis of learning, viewing it as occurring through participation in social practices and activities. However, it remains silent on the cognitive content of what is learned by participants in a community of practice. Nor does it address explicitly the role of individuals in the knowing process. Individuals are merely depicted in terms of a desire to belong to a community, progressing from a peripheral participation position to a more central one. The aim of the present paper is to assess the contribution of Lave and Wenger's (1991) practice theory for educational and other learning social settings. In a schooling context, for instance, Lave and Wenger's (1991) account of learning would imply that what students learn at school is how to relate and belong to the school community. By reducing learning and knowing to participation, and by displacing cognition from individuals to anonymous practices, the practice-based epistemology ignores the significant corpus of *content* knowledge (such as curriculums) and ascribes too passive a role to individuals and glosses over their differentiated access to resources for changing practices and their differentiated efforts in their social and cognitive development. The present paper suggests an approach to knowledge that takes into account the various facets of knowledge, that is, knowledge as *knowledge-productive practices*, as *content*, and as *relation* to a knowing subject, at the same time preserving the sociality of knowledge and learning.

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1. Introduction

The community of practice and situated learning theory purports to be a “radical critique of cognitivist theories of learning” (Handley et al., 2006), propounding a view of learning as participation in ongoing activities and practices (Fox, 2000: 853). Participation is regarded central to learning, as learning is not something that takes place in the mind of isolated individuals, but something produced and reproduced in the social relations of individuals when they participate in society (Gherardi, 1999). The new thinking is that learning is a legitimate peripheral participation in the practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Fox, 2000; Handley et al., 2006) where participation is not separate from the context in which it takes place. Participation implies “both issues of knowing and issues of being and becoming” (Elkjaer, 2003: 39) a member of a certain community. Overall, participation in practice is made a necessary condition for learning (Brown and Duguid, 2001: 204) and “an epistemological principle of learning” (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 42).

Learning as participation has the merit of circumventing the pitfalls of the dominant view of learning as acquisition of new ideas, concepts, or knowledge (Sfard, 1998). It also lacks explana-

tion of abstraction and the acquisition of theoretical knowledge (Ohlsson and Lehtinen, 1997). Participation-committed theorists are not yet willing to face major issues resulting from reducing learning to participation. For one, its refusal to objectify or reify knowledge (that is, regarding it as a well-defined entity that can be considered independently of human beings) (Sfard, 1998) denies any possibility of transferring knowledge, since transfer of knowledge means carrying it across contextual boundaries (Sfard, 1998). Pretending that transfer of knowledge does not occur ignores the significant corpus of *content* knowledge passed over to us over millennia of years, and which individuals may learn without them participating in its production. By ‘content knowledge’ is meant what is known, or the corpus of knowledge that does not belong to any particular individual or context (such as scientific knowledge, historical knowledge, technological knowledge, management knowledge, etc.). For another, participation-oriented researchers insist that the locus of knowledge is not individual minds, but publicly available domains, such as social practices, rules, discourses, etc. By displacing cognition from the knowing subject (understood as a mind–body complex) into anonymous, intention-free practices, the practice-based epistemology ascribes too passive a role to individuals and glosses over their differentiated access to resources for changing practices and their differentiated efforts in their social development (Felin and Hesterly, 2007). By the same token, it attempts to play down the role of agency, making it impossible to assess the different weight of impact of different practices (and

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different capacities of students to learn, for instance), and their different contribution to the constitution or transformation of specific subjectivities (Mouselis, 1995; Felin and Hesterly, 2007).

Consistent with Longino (2002), the present paper argues that any theory of learning or knowledge, however social it may be, has to take into account knowledge in its three facets: as a set of knowledge-productive practices (how it is shaped by the social context in which it is produced), as a (socially constructed) content relating to some (perceived) aspect of the world (what is claimed to be known in a given social setting), and as a relation to a knowing subject (who claims to know something). This is the aim of the present paper. Making a critical account of this increasingly popular practice-based epistemology, the paper goes on to complement the community of practice approach by granting equal consideration to the three facets of knowledge. The suggested epistemological position has the advantage of transcending the cognitive-social dichotomy, thereby developing a bridge between the two dominant metaphors identified by Sfard (1998): knowledge-as-acquisition (a view inspired by the field of individual-oriented psychology, as Elkjaer (2003: 40) notes), and knowledge-as-participation (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Gherardi, 2000, etc.).

To set the stage for this study, I selectively review past research on the relation between participation in social practices and learning. One of the arguments put forward in this paper is that learning new knowledge does not only and necessarily require participation in the production of that knowledge. It is also contended that participation is not sufficient for learning, for learning results from an interplay of participation and reflection or reification (Elkjaer, 2003; Gherardi, 2000) (Section 1). The paper proceeds by making an account of learning new contents of knowledge without falling prey to the spectrum of representationalism. For instance, members of a community may learn new contents of knowledge in a social context of trust (Section 3). Finally, neither displacing individuals as the locus of cognition nor privileging anonymous, subjectless practices, the paper attempts to suggest a cognizing unit consisting of individuals-in-interaction—a position that neither views individuals as independent, sovereign sources of action and cognition, nor as subsumed by their practices, but as interdependent or co-dependent for their learning upon one another (Section 4). Finally, practical implications of these considerations for the theory of learning are discussed.

2. Knowledge as participation in social practices

As noted in Section 1, the practice-oriented epistemology tends to reduce learning and knowing to participation in a set of social practices. Members of a community learn a practice through participation in its activities. But what is meant by participation? On the one hand, participation is different from “mere engagement in a practice” (Wenger, 1998: 57). On the other, individuals can participate to different varying degrees: peripheral new comers enjoy limited participation; full participants participate at the core of the community; finally, marginal participants are the periphery of the community (1998: 165–162). Building on Wenger's (1998: 116) assumption that marginal participation can be a form of “non-participation”, Handley et al. (2006) suggest that “only those individuals who successfully navigate a path from peripheral to full participation (in the eyes of the community ‘masters’) can be categorised as ‘participating’ in the sense outlined in *Situated Learning*”. The main implication is that participation (hence learning) involves “a sense of belonging (or a desire to belong), mutual understanding and a ‘progression’ along a trajectory towards full participation” (Handley et al., 2006). In order for individuals to learn they have to be participants in the social processes of everyday life of a community. If learning (an epistemological matter) is expended

to include belonging (being) to a community or becoming a practitioner (which are ontological issues) (Elkjaer, 2003). In this sense, “to know is to be capable of participating with the requisite competence in the complex web of relationships among people and activities” (Elkjaer, 2003: 44). To the extent that the outcome of learning a practice is to become a practitioner, not only to know about a practice, learning becomes a way of being and becoming part of, or participant in social processes. However, if we subscribe to Elkjaer's (2003) assumption that social learning theory combines both issues of ontology (being/becoming a practitioner) and of epistemology (knowing about that practice), then we will assume that practitioners will not learn to be competent in a practice without knowing about that practice. That is to say, practitioners will need more than just living their practice, but they also need to reflect upon it and possibly change it. Their trajectory towards full participation cannot be void of thinking, reasoning, asking questions, etc.—all of which involve reflective (cognitive) moments. Absent an explicit recognition of reflection and thinking, any practice-based theory of learning would be deficient.

2.1. Modes of participation

Conflating learning (a practice) and being (an active participant in the activities underlying that practice) becomes problematic when these two processes are not coextensive, that is, each occurring separately from the other, both spatially and temporally. Producers of knowledge (as codified in documents or reified in books) may be different from ‘knowers’ or students. The knower that something is the case (*p*) does not need to have participated in the same practice that leads to the production of knowledge that *p*. Due to the cognitive limits of individuals' skills and capacity to store and process information – Simon's (1972) ‘bounded rationality’ problem – individuals' knowledge would inevitably be specialized and domain-specific. Over and above a shared vision or image of the future that participants (or at least most of them) share with one another, no matter how temporally and spatially dispersed they may be, their efforts are also aligned and integrated through different coordination, integration mechanisms (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967). It is widely recognised that rules and routines, for instance, are effective means of influencing the thinking and acting of organizational members engaged in different tasks (Mintzberg, 1979, p. 3). This shows how interdependencies among different units can be achieved through “mutual adjustment, direct supervision, standardization of work processes, standardization of work outputs, standardization of worker skills”, as well as standardization of norms and values (Mintzberg, 1983).

2.2. Imagination and alignment

Indeed, (Wenger 1998: 227–228) provides a more elaborate definition of what is meant by belonging, distinguishing between three modes of being part of a social learning system: (1) *engagement* (doing things together); (2) *imagination* (constructing an image of ourselves, our communities and of the world); and finally, *alignment* (or making sure that our local activities are sufficiently aligned with other processes so that they can be effective beyond our own engagement). Imagination is a mode of belonging. As contended by Anderson (1991) “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined”. On this count, a sense of belonging and of a community comes into existence in the minds of its members. However, imagined though a community may be, it is enacted in various rituals, rites and ceremonies and articulated in various symbols, emblems and artefacts. Imagination is thus an active mode of participation and identity-formation which enables us to understand how, although individuals may not be coextensively present to one another and

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