

**Knowing in Practice: A “Delicate Flower” in the Organizational Learning Field**

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## **Knowing in Practice: A “Delicate Flower” in the Organizational Learning Field**

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Etienne Wenger and Dvora Yanow are two leading luminaries in the broad field of learning in organizations, their contributions ( Lave and Wenger, 1991 ; Cook and Yanow, 1993 ) being amongst the most widely cited within the sub-field of situated learning<sup>1</sup>. In this brief and necessarily selective commentary on the two articles, we begin by considering the idea of situated learning where we highlight a number of its more distinctive features before turning to consider how Wenger’s “How do you know” exemplifies or contradicts them. We conclude by offering some remarks about the situatedness of knowledge about learning, and how the espousal of reflexivity might be applied with greater consistency.

### **The Idea of Situated Learning**

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<sup>1</sup> For overviews and discussions of this sub-field, see ..... For its positioning in relation to other formulations of learning, such as ‘organizational learning’ and ‘learning in organizations’, see.....

In most representations of how knowledge is acquired in work organizations, learning tends to be identified with whatever features and activities managers deem or expect to be functionally beneficial. Only 'organizations' considered to possess these features, are then considered to merit the epithet 'learning', and are thereby nominated as learning organizations. Alternatively, certain kinds of practices are counted as learning that is 'organizational'. It is the ascription of learning to features of organizations, conceptualised as coherent entities, that is challenged by Dvora Yanow and others (Cook and Janow, 1993, Weick and Westley, 1996). As Yanow (1999 : 14) puts it, these 'new', situated accounts of learning 'decouple' the discourse of learning from 'error correction, adaptation to environmental changes, and other systems-theory-infused metaphors of learning' (ibid : 14). A transcendental or 'systems' conception of organization is rejected in favour of an immanent perspective where attention is paid to how learning is practically accomplished or enacted in organizations (Willmott, 1994). This attentiveness to '*what is meaningful to actors* engaged in organizational learning activities' - including the meanings *collectively* ascribed to artefacts such as flutes - is dubbed 'a cultural approach to learning' (Yanow, 1999 : 1, our emphasis). In setting out her approach to studying learning Yanow is careful to differentiate and distance it from other analyses of organizational culture(s) in which the focus is primarily cognitive, or where the intent is to explicate the values and beliefs (ibid : 20) , rituals, myths, ceremonies, etc that are deemed to be emblematic of a particular culture or sub-culture (ibid : 14). In contrast, her approach incorporates a concern to appreciate the kinesthetic (or embodied) and the aesthetic, as well as the cognitive, dimensions of learning activity (ibid : 12). It seeks to explore and explicate how learning is accomplished through the multi-dimensional forms of knowledge (tacit, kinesthetic, etc) that animate social practices and are reproduced/transformed through these practices.

A further distinctive feature ascribed to this self-consciously 'interpretive' approach is an appreciation of how accounts of learning are 'mediated by the theoretical constructs that researchers bring to their observations' (ibid : 2). Whatever metaphor is deployed - more or less consciously or explicitly - it is understood to be produced "as if" (ibid : 2) accounts of reality that are constituted by, and theory-dependent upon, the particular 'entailments' of the favoured metaphor. It is the metaphor that endows the object of investigation with its metaphor-dependent ontological status. So, for example, when the metaphor of culture guides the production of knowledge, it is allegedly possible to "see and even conceptually to experience a social and collective aspect of learning' (ibid : 2) absent from accounts governed by other metaphors and associated domain assumptions. We will return to this point in our concluding remarks. For the moment, we wish to suggest that the project/discourse of situational

learning can be likened to a delicate flower that competes for light and nutrients with plants/approaches that are more established and enjoy greater prominence and popular appeal. Notably, the project of situated learning, and the culturalist approach more particularly, competes for attention and legitimacy in an environment that tends to be more supportive of performative rivals. These competitors often incorporate models of "good practice" and are more readily packaged into sets of prescriptions and programmes.

### **How do you forget?**

Etienne Wenger's 'How do you know?' identifies four key components of learning systems - communities, boundaries, identities and organizations - that are compared and contrasted in terms of what they are, what they focus upon, how they contribute to performance and what is doable. Such a mapping exercise can be interpreted in a variety of ways. It may be read as offering a systematic mapping of the anatomy of learning systems that permit us to acquire and share any kind of knowledge. It may also be commended for providing an alternative to the limited and by now rather tired homilies devised by the proponents of 'learning organizations' and 'organizational learning'. The numerous tables and lists may be welcomed for making the insights of situated learning theory more tangible and accessible to practitioners. It could indeed be argued that devising a framework comprising the four elements and four questions provides something of a bridge between more established, influential and performative conceptions of learning and rather more demanding ideas about learning in organizations. Amongst these we would include Lave and Wenger's understandings that 'agent, activity, and the world mutually constitute each other' (Lave and Wenger, 1991 : 33) and that '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' (ibid : 42).

On our reading of 'How do you know?', however, there is little sign of these more challenging understandings informing the identification or the discussion of the elements of learning systems. The idea that agents, activities and the world mutually constitute each other is absent from the discussion of how the elements - communities, boundaries, identities and organizations - are accomplished and reproduced. This understanding is also missing from presentation of these four elements that are paraded as if they exist out there in the world rather than acknowledged to be artefacts of the particular theory that point to their existence. There is, then, ironically enough, a lack of reflexivity about the mutual constitution of the author as agent, the activities that make up the discourse framing and answering the question "How do you know?" and the world that is

apparently captured by by the four elements of learning systems. The translation of situated learning theory into a social learning system comprising communities, boundaries, identities and organizations, would seem to depart from, rather than elucidate or render more accessible, the theory of situated learning (see also Contu and Willmott, 1999).

How is this to be accounted for? To adopt Wenger's terminology, the weakening, forgetting and perhaps abandonment of radical aspects of Lave and Wenger's original formulation of situated learning (see earlier) is indicative of a *change of analytic (communities of) practice*. The concept of 'community of practice', which is destined to become the most enduring conceptual legacy of Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory (see also Yanow, 1999 : 19 *et seq*), conveys the understanding processes of learning are always situated in, and articulated by, members of a community who reproduce their knowledgeability through participation in common practices. The formulation of learning presented in "How do you know" can be interpreted as a shift *from* earlier participation in an analytic community engaged in practices that aspire to enhance mutual understanding for purposes of emancipation (Lave and Wenger, 1991) *to* participation in a community that is primarily preoccupied with improving prediction and control for purposes of improving performance (Willmott, 1997a). In Lave and Wenger's *Situated Learning*, attention is directed to the 'alienation from full participation in learning' and to hegemonic relations [that] 'truncate possibilities for identities of mastery' within communities of practice (ibid : 42). In "How do you know?", in contrast, references to hegemony, alienation and blocked mobility have disappeared, to be replaced with concerns about specifying the learning technologies that will facilitate the realization of a seemingly consensual vision of progress :

'organizations must understand the processes by which communities of practice evolve and interact. We need to build organizational and technological infrastructures that do not dismiss or impede these processes, but rather recognize, support, and leverage them' (Wenger, 1999 : 20)

In "How do you know?", we encounter an (unacknowledged) shift or slippage from an earlier representation of learning as praxis fashioned within a discourse of critique to a formulation of learning as technology conceived within a discourse of regulation and performance. In the earlier conception of learning, the idea of 'communities of practice' facilitated an appreciation of the diversity and credibility as well as the visibility of *local and unobtrusive*

*learning* that is generally ignored or marginalised within dominant thinking about 'learning organizations' and 'organizational learning'. In "How do you know?", the concept of communities of practice is recast. It is translated from a fluid, mutually constituting process into a series of social objects that, in principle, are amenable to manipulation by skilful organizational designers and developers. This control, we are informed, is to be exercised by managing what are identified as the 'infrastructural elements' of communities, such as 'organizing events, developing leadership, fostering relationships, opening membership, doing learning projects, and producing community artefacts' (ibid : 6; see also pp 6-8).

At the same time, residues of the earlier, more radical formulation of situated learning remain and are in tension with Wenger's participation in the new analytic community of practice. In "How do you know?", there is an enduring tensions between the idea that communities of practice should be self-regulating and a prescriptive ambition to manage them in ways that are organizationally valued. Wenger urges his readers to conceive of 'the value of participation and leadership in communities of practice as a contribution to the organization's goals of capability development' (ibid : 20). Yet, earlier, emphasis is placed upon ensuring that control over the design of and access to the artefacts of the community, which include documents, tools, stories, symbols, etc., should remain within the community (ibid : 8). How is this tension allayed? By assuming that the position of managers and other agents of intervention *vis a vis* communities of practice is *benign* for the self-determination of communities of practice, with respect to the purpose and effects of such interventionist design and development efforts.

In this formulation, impediments to learning targeted by design efforts are assumed to be susceptible to managerial intervention, and are certainly not viewed as endemic to work organizations within firms embedded within capitalist production relations. It is taken for granted that tensions and associated imperfections and irrationalities within and between members of communities of practice - such as their occupancy of very different positions within hierarchies through which access to material and symbolic resources is gained - are predisposed to correction by those who 'understand the processes by which communities of practice evolve and interact' (ibid : 20). It is assumed that any 'clash of practices' (Yanow, 1999 : 20) can be resolved by interventions that are sensitive to the existence of boundaries, and are thereby successfully reconcile differences by converting 'potential difficulties' into 'new opportunities' (Wenger, 1999 : 9) and by

transforming hostile relations between communities into relations of mutual respect and interdependence. Seemingly, current forms of 'organizational infrastructure' that 'impede' these processes can be remedied irrespective of inequalities of social background (class), gender, ethnicity, etc. that arise from the *wider situatedness* of work organizations within politico-economic contexts.

### **Situating Knowing about Learning**

This kind of thinking may well strike a receptive chord with managers and consultants. By virtue of their position within organization where they mediate between the providers of capital and the suppliers of labour, managers are recurrently faced with pressures, problems, tensions and contradictions (Willmott, 1997). As a consequence, managers have shown themselves to be receptive to consultants and others who are in the business of appropriating, packaging and selling ideas, and associated technologies, for addressing managers' dilemmas and difficulties. Perversely enough, however, this thinking also takes us away from a culturalist or interpretive approach to organizing practices. It is a perverse distraction because, Yanow (1999) contends, it is precisely this approach that promises to equip us with a richer and thicker understanding of how the reality attributed to organizations is accomplished. In principle, it is by embracing this approach that a more informed appreciation the pressures, problems, tensions and contradictions that recurrently beset all those working in organizations may be developed.

The culturalist approach, Yanow argues, enable us to "see" how activities are situated within, and are thus enabled and constrained by, diverse communities of practices. Its interpretive methods, she claims, 'produce a *record* of local knowledge : *detailed descriptions* of that activities that groups *actually* engage in, and members' sensemaking of those actions *from their own points of view*' ( *ibid* : 8, emphases added). Such testimony is appealing because it promise to *reveal* the *reality* of organizations, in the form of recordings and descriptions of activities and apprehensions, that are overlooked by and/or inaccessible to other, non-interpretive methods. On reflection, however, it also violates the espoused commitment to the understanding that whatever is "seen" is constituted through a discourse that, in Yanow's formulation, is identified by one or more metaphors, such as 'culture'.

If this formulation is consistently followed, there is no basis for claiming that a culturalist approach or interpretive method can produce 'a record' or describe what groups actually engage in.

Rather, it is possible only to say that the particular complex of assumptions attributed to this approach generate particular kinds of accounts of what learning is. Does this mean, then, that one account of learning is as good as any other since none of them can be evaluated against some measure of reality that is determined independently of competing approaches? Our answer to this question is that the absence of such a measure brings with it benefits. Notably, it served to heighten appreciation of the distinctive contribution of different kinds of knowledge (e.g. about learning) instead of seeking to assess them according to one set of criteria different forms of knowledge. Second, it makes space for reflection upon the situatedness of knowledge production and, more specifically, the power relations that prompt and legitimize different forms of production. Third, it encourages a reflexive awareness of how all accounts of learning - including our commentary on Wenger's and Yanow's articles and your reading of this commentary - are themselves articulations of the communities of practice in which we and you currently happen to be participating. And, finally, an acceptance of the lack of some objective yardstick for assessing the accuracy or veracity of competing accounts/theories of learning may shift debate on the merits of different approaches from the terrain of epistemology to the province of ethics.

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