

Communities of Practice

An exploration of the ideas of Etienne Wenger

Etienne Wenger is a Swiss-born educationist and social learning theorist who developed these ideas in California in the early 1990s alongside a social anthropologist called Jean Lave.

The key text I am drawing from is his 1998 book “Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity”. He begins this book with an explanation of Social Learning Theory, starting with a description of the current state of play, still not so different in 2013:

“Our institutions... are largely based on the assumption that learning is an individual process, that it has a beginning and an end, that it is best separated from the rest of our activities, and that it is the result of teaching.” (p3)

And then challenging this view:

“So, what if we adopted a different perspective, one that placed learning in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world? What if we assumed that learning is as much a part of our human nature as eating or sleeping, that it is both life-sustaining and inevitable, and that – given a chance – we are quite good at it? And what if, in addition, we assumed that learning is, in its essence, a fundamentally social phenomenon, reflecting our own deeply social nature as human beings capable of knowing? What kind of understanding would such a perspective yield on how learning takes place and on what is required to support it?” (p3)

He predicates his theory on 4 assumptions:

1. We are social beings. Far from being trivially true, this fact is a central aspect of learning.
2. Knowledge is a matter of competence with respect to valued enterprises – such as singing in tune, discovering scientific facts, fixing machines, writing poetry etc
3. Knowing is a matter of participating in the pursuit of such enterprises, that is, of active engagement in the world.
4. Meaning – our ability to experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful – is ultimately what learning is to produce. (p4)

I think that the middle two of these assumptions are initially the most difficult to grasp. Distinguishing between “knowledge” and “knowing” is key. Knowledge is entirely experiential, and only comes to life when it is employed in the process of an activity. The word Wenger uses to describe this knowledge is “competence”. Using this competence in actively pursuing important goals is “knowing”. He speaks about this later in the book, where he rejects the traditional dichotomies that divide the practical and the intellectual:

“The process of engaging in practice always involves the whole person, both acting and knowing at once. In practice, so-called manual activity is not thoughtless, and mental activity is not disembodied.” (p47)

There are some important usages which Wenger gives to commonly used words, and it's worth pausing to identify these usages.

Practice

This term has a central meaning for Wenger (and it's in the title of his book, of course). It is used to describe the “embodied, delicate, active, social, negotiated, complex process of participation”. (p49)

However, this in itself doesn't fully do justice to his use of the term. He gives over the whole of the first half of the book to an exploration of the different aspects of practice.

Wenger says that being alive as a human being involves constant engagement in activity (and therefore constant learning). But because of our essentially social nature, this engagement is not solitary, and involves interaction “with each other and with the world”. And this requires us to “tune our relations with each other and with the world accordingly.” (p45)

This tuning process is what he defines as learning.

Meaning

This is the first aspect of practice Wenger describes. And it is a complex concept which requires understanding two more of Wenger's key terms. He describes meaning thus:

1. Meaning is located in a process I will call the *negotiation of meaning*
2. The negotiation of meaning involves the interaction of two constituent processes, which I will call *participation* and *reification*
3. Participation and reification form a duality that is fundamental to the human experience of meaning and thus to the nature of practice. (p52)

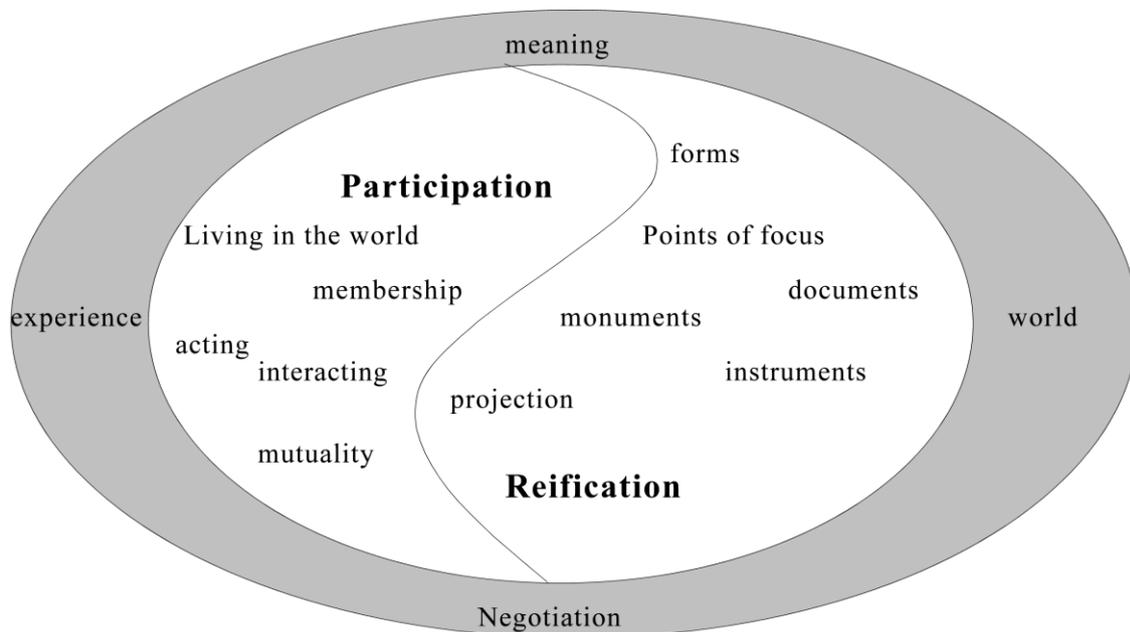
Participation

Wenger uses this term to describe the process of action and connection with others.

“It is a complex process that combines doing, talking, thinking, feeling, and belonging. It involves our whole person, including our bodies, minds, emotions, and social relations.” (p56)

Reification

This term is used to describe the way abstract concepts are treated as concrete, and capable of agency. This is something we do a lot, and it makes communication easier. Examples are the way we talk about the economy, or democracy, the law, or “the will of the people”. This usefulness also hides a problem though – because these abstract concepts are in fact not fixed, and (although convenient) it is illusory and misleading to treat them as such. Wenger sees the negotiation of meaning as therefore requiring a constant interaction between reification and participation. This essential duality is very important in understanding Wenger’s thoughts on practice. He has a pictorial representation of the duality (p63):



He emphasises the usefulness of keeping this duality in mind. When a reification is encountered, look for the participation; when participation is encountered, look for the reification.

Communities of Practice

Wenger proposes the term Communities of Practice thus:

“Over time, this collective leaning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. It makes sense, therefore, to call these kinds of communities *communities of practice*.” (p45)

So – a little more about the nature of communities of practice (CoP):

Wenger says that there are three essential dimensions of a CoP (p137):

1. Mutual Engagement

This is about the interactions between members in the CoP – and the relationships that result from the interaction

2. A joint enterprise

Members of the community have a deep enough engagement with the enterprise to negotiate its nature, take responsibility for it, and contribute to its pursuit.

3. A shared repertoire

This refers to the words, phrases, arrangements, ways of approaching problems which have become the history and present of a CoP – and which are continuously and simultaneously re-negotiated, and employed, by members of the CoP

Understanding these three dimensions helps in defining what it is to be a member of a CoP – each of these dimensions refer to activity, and therefore *practice*. And for someone to be a member of a CoP they will need to be engaged in all three dimensions of practice. Wenger uses the term “competence” to describe the active participation with these three dimensions. Competent membership of a CoP would therefore include all three. He goes on to propose that for learning in practice to be possible, a regime of competence must interact with lived experience. There is a two-way interaction of experience and competence which is crucial to learning, and to the evolution of practice:

“In (this interaction) lies the potential for a transformation of both experience and competence.... In fact learning can be characterised as a change in the alignment between experience and competence, whichever of the two takes a lead in causing a realignment at any given moment.”

Later, around 2007, Wenger puts this rather neatly (quoted on the Infed website):

“Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope. In a nutshell: Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.”

Later (as described again on the Infed site) Wenger altered his description of the determinants of a CoP to three elements: a domain, a community and a practice. However, these are essentially in the same territory as his original description above.

Learning in Practice (p95)

Practices are histories of mutual engagement, negotiation of an enterprise, and development of a shared repertoire. Wenger proposes therefore the following processes for learning in practice:

- *Evolving forms of mutual engagement*: discovering how to engage, what helps and what hinders, developing mutual relationships; defining identities, establishing who is who, who is good at what, who knows what, who is easy or hard to get along with.
- *Understanding and tuning their enterprise*: aligning their engagement with it, and learning to become and hold each other accountable to it; struggling to define the enterprise and reconciling conflicting interpretations of what the enterprise is about.
- *Developing their repertoire, styles, and discourses*: renegotiating the meaning of various elements; producing or adopting tools, artifacts, representations; recording and recalling events; inventing new terms and redefining or abandoning old ones; telling and retelling stories; creating and breaking routines.

Practice as boundary

Wenger acknowledges that CoPs do not exist in isolation, and that in fact we are generally members of several at any time. Artifacts, enterprises, histories of CoP are shared with other communities, and with the world at large.

He has an interesting exploration of how the duality of participation and reification helps to elucidate these boundaries. Sometimes boundaries appear to be defined more by artifacts (rules, symbols etc) and sometimes by activity (behaviour, ways of speaking) but in either case, this is never the whole story, and it is necessary to look to the other for a complete (negotiated) meaning of boundary.

In the second part of the book, Wenger explores the nature of identity, and the interaction between personal identity and community membership.

There is an excellent and incredibly concise summary of the concepts in the book on pages 226 – 228. And in the Epilogue, he suggests how these theoretical ideas could be used in the design of environments that will foster social learning.

Application of the ideas

As a conclusion, Wenger introduces some ideas of educational design based on the principles of CoP. The dimensions of design are: (p264-277)

1. *Participation and reification* – how much to reify learning, its subject and its object. Focusing on the mechanics of learning at the cost of meanings tends to render learning itself problematic. In many cases, when the meanings of learning are properly attended to, the mechanics take care of themselves. In practice, it is in the meanings we are able to negotiate through learning that we invest ourselves, and it is those meanings that are the source of the energy required for learning. Questions we can ask ourselves include:
 - To what degree should the subject matter be reified for educational purposes?
 - What forms of participation are required to give meaning to the subject matter?
 - How much should learning itself be reified as a process?
 - At what point is such reification more a distraction than a help?
 - What forms of participation can be designed that do not require reification of the subject matter beyond what is already part of the practice?
2. *The designed and the emergent* - the relationship between teaching and learning. Learning and teaching are not inherently linked. Much learning takes place without teaching, and indeed much teaching takes place without learning. Learning is an emergent process, which may use teaching as one of its many structuring resources. Questions we can ask ourselves here include:
 - How can we honour the emergent character of learning?
 - How can we minimise teaching so as to maximise learning?
 - What kind of rhythm and shifts of focus will allow learning and teaching to inform each other?
 - How can we maximise the processes of negotiation of meaning enabled by that interaction?
3. *The local and the global* – educational experiences must connect to other experiences. Designed teaching and learning activities tend to occur in a specified local space. This will often constitute a specific practice. Applying what has been learned becomes a matter of moving from the local practice to a wider practice. Questions that could be asked include:
 - How can we broaden the scope of coverage without losing the depth of local engagement?
 - How can we create links to other practices so that education does not become self-contained?

- How can we enable transformative experiences that change students' understanding of themselves as learners and thus their ability to move among practices and learn whatever they need to learn where they are?
4. *Identification and negotiability* – there are multiple perspectives on what an educational design is about: its effect on learning depends on inviting identities of participation. In terms of learning, identification with or alienation from an institution of learning will have deeper effects than success or failure in the curriculum. Those who are marginalised at school, for instance, they may continue this trajectory, and enter a marginalised relationship with the workplace. Questions that could be asked include:
- Which sources of identification does an educational design compete with and which does it offer?
 - What broader economies of meaning is it part of? What kinds of economies of meaning does it generate internally? And how are the two articulated?
 - For whom is the design an opportunity to build an identity of participation?
 - Who defines success and failure, and how is this definition negotiated among the parties involved?

Educational engagement

The purpose of educational design is to support the formation of learning communities. Therefore the first requirement of educational design is to offer opportunities for engagement. Learners will learn what allows them to contribute to the enterprise of the community and to engage with others around that enterprise. And this is a process of identity-building unique to each learner. It is more important for students to have experiences that allow them to take charge of their own learning than to cover a lot of material.

Educational imagination

If education is to give students a sense of the possible trajectories available in various communities, then education must involve imagination in a central way. Students must be enabled to explore who they are, who they are not, and who they could be. Reflection, and the ability to look at oneself from new perspectives, is central to this process. Experimentation is also essential.

Educational alignment

This is the reality check. The boundaries of the CoP must be pushed so that multimembership, including a wider context beyond the immediate is engaged with.

In the excellent article on Infed, three main areas for application of the CoP model are identified:

- *Learning is in the relationships between people*
- *Educators work so that people can become participants in communities of practice.*
- *There is an intimate connection between knowledge and activity.*

I would add to these:

- **Learning is about transformation**
- **Learning is about building identity**
- **Learning is a process of negotiation of meaning**

The very helpful and typically clear article on the Infed site which summarises these ideas is here: <http://infed.org/mobi/jean-lave-etienne-wenger-and-communities-of-practice/>

And there is a useful critique of the literature around Communities of Practice here: <http://www.implementationscience.com/content/4/1/11>

Mark Waters, November 2013