

BOOK REVIEW

Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1992). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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Situated Learning contributes to a growing body of research that focusses on the situated character of human understanding, learning and communication. The book explores the relationship between learning and the social situation in which it occurs. Rather than placing the learning in the minds of persons, it is located in the processes of coparticipation. To put it as a question the book asks: What social context provides the proper context for learning to take place?

The main purpose of this monograph is to translate the notion of situated learning into a specific analytic approach to learning. The concept of legitimate peripheral participation is the core element in this project. It denotes the process by which a learner becomes part of a community of practice through his participation in the actual practice of an expert. The learner participates only to a limited degree, with a limited access and responsibility in the production and to the product of the community.

The book can also be read as an anthropological analysis of apprenticeship, because the concept of legitimate peripheral participation is developed through analysis of five studies of apprenticeship from very different social and cultural contexts.

This monograph is divided into five chapters or rather six if we count the very readable foreword by anthropologist William F. Hanks. He places the work of Lave and Wenger in an anthropological theoretical context - with an emphasis on studies in language use and interaction. The framework of the book is related to a joint body of development in the social sciences where phenomenological, interactive and practice centered approaches have gained importance. He argues that Lave and Wenger place themselves in between two extreme positions: On the one hand a classical structural approach. On the other hand an extreme inter-actionism that rejects the premises of structure. They locate learning in the increased access of learners to participating roles in expert performances - not in the acquisition of structure. At the same time they do not reject the notion that participation is structured - this is what shapes the conditions for legitimate peripheral participation.

In the first two chapters the history of legitimate peripheral participation is outlined and the concept is placed in a broader theoretical discussion about learning. It is emphasized that legitimate peripheral participation is not an educational form or a pedagogical strategy, but an analytical viewpoint on learning and a way of understanding learning. Lave and Wenger want to make a fundamental distinction between learning and intentional instruction. It is not enough to locate learning in classroom interaction as many theories on schooling do. Learning is viewed as a feature of practice, which might be present in all sorts of activity, not just in clear cases of training and apprenticeship.

I get the impression that the motivation of the two authors is found in a distrust of the educational system of today. Throughout the book legitimate peripheral participation is discussed as a contrast to schooling and traditional didactic analysis of learning and learning settings - schooling is the bad guy.

Legitimate peripheral participation is related to an understanding of practice, person and social world. The intention is to construct a conceptual bridge between the skilled identities of persons and the reproduction and transformation of communities of practice. Lave and Wenger claim that common processes are inherited in the production of changing persons and changing communities of practice. To study learning you have to raise questions about the sociocultural organization of space into places of activity: Learners access to technology, social relations, and forms of activity. About characteristic conflicts, interests, and relations of power. In other words, the production and reproduction of communities of practice. Learning embodies the structural characteristics of communities of practice.

The theoretical discussion of legitimate peripheral participation is interesting from a Danish psychological perspective because Lave and Wenger draw on activity theory and critical psychology counting authors such as Vygotsky, Davydov, Hedegaard, Engeström and Dreier. Furthermore, they relate their core concept to theorizing about social practice, praxis, and activity by authors such as Giddens and Bourdieu. All theories which are developed out of a long Marxist tradition in the social sciences. It is nice to meet an approach that gives new life to activity theory and critical psychology. I was beginning to worry that the books of Leontjev, Vygotsky and Holzkamp, which I have been forced to read through my years of study, had been turned into historically interesting but rather useless fossils.

In chapter three the concept of legitimate peripheral participation is used to analyze five studies of apprenticeship. The cases are taken from very different cultural settings and historical traditions. We are introduced to tailors in Liberia, "nondrinking alcoholics" in the US, midwives in Mexico, US navy quartermasters and butchers in US supermarkets.

The cases are interesting reading in themselves. We follow how the apprentices develop their skills from a position as newcomers with a very limited access to any of the activities in the community - to a status as old-timers who have built up an identity of masters through their developing participation in the community, its technologies, social relations, and forms of activity. We are introduced to the coordination and segmentation of the apprentices' increasing participation, and the different communities' characteristic conflicts, interests, and shared meanings. How the motivation of the apprentices changes as a part of their changing participation and identities. One of the main points of the analysis is that the apprentice's access to practice - rather than to instruction - is the resource for learning.

Studies in apprenticeship is specially interesting in a Danish context, because Denmark is one of the few western countries that uses the principle of apprenticeship as the basis of our public education of

craftsmen. In spite of this, there has been a very limited Danish research on this topic.

In the last two chapters Lave and Wenger raise a series of issues or questions on the basis of their analysis through legitimate peripheral participation. What are the structuring resources for learning in practice? Where is the place of knowledge in communities of practice? How does the problem of access influence the learning of the participants? And issues on: The relation of language and learning in a situated perspective. Motivation and identity as effects of participation. Finally, how the conflict of continuity and displacement between learner and master/ newcomer and old-timer is a central aspect in the understanding of contradictions and change in individuals as well as communities of practice.

The book emphasises that analyzing a form of learning through legitimate peripheral participation must involve analysis of the political and social organization of that form, its historical development and the effects of both of these on sustained possibilities for learning (p.66). This aspect sounds important, but it is difficult for me to find in Lave and Wenger's analysis of apprenticeship. They focus on a more narrow perspective and relatively small reproduction circles in their analysis of the learning processes involved in moving from a position as newcomer to the position as old-timer.

It is my impression that Lave and Wenger's approach is most useful in analyzing learning settings where the time it takes to move from being a newcomer to becoming an old-timer is relatively long, and where the master has got the power to structure the community of participants. I am not sure that the concept of legitimate peripheral participation is as descriptive when it comes to the analysis of communities of learning with radically smaller reproduction cycles as it is in cases of apprenticeship. An example could be the organizational consultant who comes as an expert to a working community, but who has got very limited power and access to the community? In a way he is the newcomer and the learners are old-timers.

In spite of this, the concept of legitimate peripheral participation can be an inspiration and fruitful in rethinking a broad spectrum of learning settings. Some interesting insights and questions can definitely be crystallized from this social perspective on learning - the problematic character of processes of learning and cycles of social reproduction - and the relation between the two. Pertinent questions are: What are the structuring resources that shape the process and content of learning possibilities and the learner's changing perspective? In what way is the learner's access to knowledge organized and how does it change in the process from being a newcomer to becoming an old-timer? How does the problem of access to technology, social relations, production processes and the other activities influence the learning process? What types of conflicts and power relations are found in the organization of communities of practice where learning takes place?

Situated Learning is undoubtedly worth reading. Lave and Wenger present an interesting and strong position on issues which are of basic interest to practice theory in a broader sense, and not just issues on learning

and apprenticeship. At the same time I read these 100 pages as a work in progress towards a theory of sterling character.