Communities of Practice presents a theory of learning that starts with this assumption: engagement in social practice is the fundamental process by which we learn and so become who we are. The primary unit of analysis is neither the individual nor social institutions but rather the informal “communities of practice” that people form as they pursue shared enterprises over time. In order to give a social account of learning, the theory explores in a systematic way the intersection of issues of community, social practice, meaning, and identity. The result is a broad conceptual framework for thinking about learning as a process of social participation. This ambitious but thoroughly accessible framework has relevance for the practitioner as well as the theoretician, and is presented with all the breadth, depth, and rigor necessary to address such a complex and yet profoundly human topic.
Communities of practice
Learning in Doing: Social, Cognitive, and Computational Perspectives

Series Editor Emeritus
JOHN SEELY BROWN, Xerox Palo Alto Research Center

General Editors
ROY PEA, Professor of Education and the Learning Sciences and Director, Stanford Center for Innovations in Learning, Stanford University
CHRISTIAN HEATH, The Management Centre, King’s College, London
LUCY A. SUCHMAN, Centre for Science Studies and Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, UK

Plans and Situated Actions: The Problem of Human–Machine Communication
I. LUCY A. SUCHMAN

The Construction Zone: Working for Cognitive Change in Schools
DENIS NEWMAN, PEG GRIFFIN, and MICHAEL COLE

Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation
JEAN LAVE and ETIENNE WENGER

Street Mathematics and School Mathematics
TEREZINHA NUNES, DAVID WILLIAM CARRAHER, and ANALUCIA DIAS SCHLIEEMANN

Understanding Practice: Perspectives on Activity and Context
SETH CHAIKLIN and JEAN LAVE

Distributed Cognitions: Psychological and Educational Considerations
GAVRIEL SALOMON

The Computer As Medium
PETER BOGH ANDERSEN, BERIT HOLMQVIST, and JENS F. JENSEN

Sociocultural Studies of Mind
JAMES V. WERTSCH, PABLO DEL RIO, and AMELIA ALVAREZ

Sociocultural Psychology: Theory and Practice of Doing and Knowing
LAURA M. W. MARTIN, KATHERINE NELSON, and ETHEL TOBACH

Mind and Social Practice: Selected Writings of Sylvia Scribner
ETHEL TOBACH, RACHEL JOFFE FALMAGNE, MARY BROWN PARLEE, LAURA M. W. MARTIN, and AGGIE SCRIBNER KAPELMAN

Cognition and Tool Use: The Blacksmith at Work
CHARLES M. KELLER and JANET DIXON KELLER

Computation and Human Experience
PHILIP E. AGRE

Continued on page following the Index
Communities of practice
Learning, meaning, and identity

ETIENNE WENGER
Institute for Research on Learning
To Paula, Jad, Sheena, and Kehan
Contents

Series forward ............................... xi
Acknowledgments ........................... xiii

Prologue: Contexts ..................... 1
Introduction: A social theory of learning 3
    A conceptual perspective: theory and practice 3
    Intellectual context 11
    Structure of the book 15
Vignette I: Welcome to claims processing! 18
Vignette II: The “C, F, and J” thing 35
Coda 0: Understanding ........................ 39

Part I: Practice ....................... 43
Intro I: The concept of practice .......... 45
    Claims processors: a community of practice 45
    Social practice 47
    Structure of Part I 49

Chapter 1: Meaning .................... 51
    Negotiation of meaning 52
    Participation 55
    Reification 57
    The duality of meaning 62

Chapter 2: Community ................. 72
    Mutual engagement 73
    Joint enterprise 77
    Shared repertoire 82
    Negotiating meaning in practice 84
## Contents

### Chapter 3: Learning
- The dual constitution of histories ........................................ 87
- Histories of learning .......................................................... 93
- Generational discontinuities .................................................. 99

### Chapter 4: Boundary
- The duality of boundary relations ........................................ 104
- Practice as connection ....................................................... 113
- The landscape of practice .................................................... 118

### Chapter 5: Locality
- The locality of practice ........................................................ 123
- Constellations of practices ................................................... 126
- The local and the global ....................................................... 131

### Coda I: Knowing in practice
- .......................................................................................... 134

### Part II: Identity
- .......................................................................................... 143

#### Intro II: A focus on identity
- The individual and the collective ......................................... 145
- Some assumptions to avoid .................................................. 146
- Structure of Part II .............................................................. 147

#### Chapter 6: Identity in practice
- Negotiated experience: participation and reification ............. 149
- Community membership ...................................................... 152
- Trajectories .......................................................................... 153
- Nexus of multimembership ................................................... 158
- Local–global interplay ............................................................ 161

#### Chapter 7: Participation and non-participation
- Identities of non-participation .............................................. 164
- Sources of participation and non-participation ..................... 167
- Institutional non-participation .............................................. 169

#### Chapter 8: Modes of belonging
- Engagement ........................................................................... 173
- Imagination ........................................................................... 174
- Alignment .............................................................................. 175
- Belonging and communities ................................................ 178
- The work of belonging ......................................................... 181
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Identification and negotiability</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negotiability</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The dual nature of identity</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social ecologies of identity</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda II</td>
<td>Learning communities</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Epilogue: Design</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Synopsis: Design for learning</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A perspective on learning</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Design and practice</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Structure of the Epilogue</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Learning architectures</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dimensions</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Components</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A design framework</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Organizations</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dimensions of organizational design</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organization, learning, and practice</td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organizational engagement</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organizational imagination</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organizational alignment</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dimensions of educational design</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education and identity: a learning architecture</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Educational engagement</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Educational imagination</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Educational alignment</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Educational resources</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Index</td>
<td>309</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Series foreword

This series for Cambridge University Press is becoming widely known as an international forum for studies of situated learning and cognition. Innovative contributions are being made by anthropology, by cognitive, developmental, and cultural psychology, by computer science, by education, and by social theory. These contributions are providing the basis for new ways of understanding the social, historical, and contextual nature of the learning, thinking, and practice that emerges from human activity. The empirical settings of these research inquiries range from the classroom to the workplace, to the high technology office, and to learning in the streets and in other communities of practice.

The situated nature of learning and remembering through activity is a central fact. It may appear obvious that human minds develop in social situations and extend their sphere of activity and communicative competencies. But cognitive theories of knowledge representation and learning alone have not provided sufficient insight into these relationships.

This series was born of the conviction that new and exciting interdisciplinary syntheses are underway as scholars and practitioners from diverse fields seek to develop theory and empirical investigations adequate for characterizing the complex relations of social and mental life, and for understanding successful learning wherever it occurs. The series invites contributions that advance our understanding of these seminal issues.

Roy Pea
John Seely Brown
Jan Hawkins
Acknowledgments

A while ago, I asked my colleague Jean Lave in exactly which publication she had first introduced the term community of practice. We had used the term in a book we wrote together, but I wanted to give her proper credit for originating it. To my surprise, she replied: “I thought you were the one who came up with it.” Now, whatever she says, I still believe that she was the one. But perhaps there are more important points to make about this anecdote than trying to settle the issue.

The first point is about Jean. Her response is typical of the kind of intellectual generosity that makes her such an outstanding teacher and colleague. It is the gift of great teachers to invite such participation that what they are teaching becomes truly your own. So even if her memory of events were more precise than mine in a technical sense, my version would still reflect a true reality.

The second point is about this book. Regardless of who actually coined the phrase that became its title, it was our collaboration that brought the topic into focus and initiated the inquiry that I am pursuing here. In this sense, this book owes Jean its very existence. Even though she should not be held accountable for everything I say, the spirit of our collaboration clearly lives on in these pages.

The third point is about communities and acknowledgments. Dissecting a creation in order to assign individual credit can easily become counterproductive. To celebrate our efforts and our achievements, we need not become blind to the social fabric that makes them possible. We need not deny each other the recognition of our mutual interdependence. At the very least, we can appreciate those close connections, conversations, and communities in which our participation is obvious, and this is what acknowledgments are about. But this recognition must be an opening, not a closing. If, as complexity theory would have it, a butterfly flapping its wings can trigger monsoons, then how are we to know
which butterflies and which flappings of wings to include in the reach of our recognition, and which to exclude?

The idea is not to belittle individual effort or deny the reality of authorship. To produce a book like this one, for instance, is hard work, and I did put my heart in it. I know all too well the daunting loneliness of the encounter between writer and writing. But loneliness is not the right word, because the true threat of loneliness lies in accounting and creating separations and boundaries, not in our personal efforts. Writing is always the production of a community of sorts, and the kind of chicken-and-egg ambiguity of this statement is part of the point: it is not easy to assess whether a book creates a community or the other way around. In my case especially, this book is clearly part of an emerging community. In so many discussions of the concepts I was articulating, I had the humbling yet exhilarating experience that I was giving expression and form to what people already knew, transforming their and my understanding in the process.

It is through the Institute for Research on Learning that I became a participant in the emerging community to which this book is addressed, and it was there – both institutionally and intellectually – that I pursued my inquiry. Few institutions I know would have had the perseverance to see such a project through and the qualities to make it possible. For their steady support I thank the founders, the directors, my fellow researchers and members of the staff, as well as the various partners of IRL with whom I had a chance to work. Their interest, confidence, and understanding have been an essential contribution to this book.

Many people have looked at drafts of my manuscript and offered a range of comments and suggestions, individually or in the context of group discussions. While I cannot possibly thank everyone by name here, I do at least want to acknowledge the contributions of the following people: Bryan Adkins, Thomas Binder, Terry Carter, Debra Cash, Melissa Cefkin, Lone Dirckinck-Holmfeld, Meg Graham, Jim Greeno, Rogers Hall, Peter Henschel, Peter Hillen, Manuel Imaz, Maryalice Jordan-Mash, Tony Kortens, David Little, Brook Manville, Norma Mendoza-Denton, Langdon Morris, Susan Newman, Klaus Nielsen, Geoff Nunberg, John O’Neill, Martin Packer, George Pór, Kevin Quinnlan, George Roth, Williams Rifkin, Judy Rodgers, Craig Rodine, Bill Snyder, Estee Solomon-Gray, Lindy Sullivan, Susan Stucky, Kären Wieckert, and Helga Wild. I also want to thank my editors, Julia Hough and Matt Darnell, for their help and patience.
Acknowledgments

I owe special thanks to my colleague Penelope Eckert. Her reliable friendship through all this time has made my task considerably more enjoyable, and her intellectual companionship is reflected in this book much more deeply than the few references to her work would suggest. For his part, John Seely Brown has been continuously supportive of my inquiry for many years and in many ways, in particular by using his perspicacity and influence to persuade many people (including me at times) of the importance of this work. Last but not least, Paul Duguid was a very helpful reader of earlier drafts and actually took time away from his own writing projects to do an in-depth editorial review of my first complete draft. His detailed and insightful critique has been invaluable, helping me add much needed clarity and coherence to both the content and the form of the final text.

I gratefully acknowledge the sustained financial support of the Xerox Foundation, without which this project would have simply been impossible. I received additional support from a few corporations: AMR, DEC, Nynex, and Xerox. I thank the individuals whose sponsorship has made this corporate support possible: Jon Abeles, Paul Allaire, Robert Bauer, John Seely Brown, Jim Euchner, David Kearns, Mark Maletz, John McDermott, and Ed Thomas.

I also thank all the employees of Alinsu who have made my fieldwork possible and whose identity I must keep to myself. In particular, I thank the claims processors for opening up their community to my unconventional participation.

I am so indebted to my wife, Paula, and my children, Jad and Sheena (and now Kehan), that I am not quite sure whether to thank them or to apologize to them. It is a miracle, for sure, that they are still as interested as they are in reading books. Whether it is by thanks or apologies that I acknowledge the hardships they endured through the writing of this book, my real debt to them is one of love — transmuting the demands of life into the chance to know, through the resilient closeness of our beings, the sweet pain of too much love. This precious learning does, I think, transpire in subtle ways through these pages.