Introduction

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The concept of *communities of practice*, developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998) as a central idea in situated approaches to learning has been taken up across social, educational and management sciences. It has been used, applied, criticised, adapted and developed by a wide range of researchers in these fields. It is currently one of the most articulated and developed concepts within broad social theories of learning.

This book consists of ten specially commissioned chapters, brought together as a coherent volume. Each chapter examines a specific aspect of the concept of *community of practice*, examining it in depth and developing it in some way. The title *Beyond Communities of Practice* is to be taken in two senses. Firstly, the book takes Wenger's 1998 *Communities of Practice* book as its main reference point, and it examines learning situations which are broader than the very specific notion described in the 1998 book. Secondly, this book goes beyond the notion of communities of practice in developing the concept in several ways. The key contributions are framings provided by theories of language, literacy, discourse and power and understandings of the broader social context in which communities of practice are located.

THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

The starting point for the idea of a community of practice is that people typically come together in groupings to carry out activities

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in everyday life, in the workplace and in education. Such groupings can be seen as distinct from the formal structures of these domains. These groups are characterised by three aspects. Firstly, members interact with each other in many ways, which Wenger refers to as *mutual engagement*. Secondly, they will have a common endeavour, which is referred to as *joint enterprise.* Thirdly, they develop a *shared repertoire* of common resources of language, styles and routines by means of which they express their identities as members of the group. *Situated learning* then means engagement in a community of practice, and *participation* in communities of practice becomes the fundamental process of learning. These ideas are developed in Wenger's book by means of a theory of interlinked concepts concerned with practice, meaning and identity. We return to these concepts as the various chapters of this book amplify different parts of this theory.

The concept of community of practice has been taken up and used by people working in many different areas. It has had an immediate appeal and perceived usefulness across a range of situations. Like any useful concept, people have used it in a variety of ways. Some have kept close to the original formulation, and some have developed it. Some have found it to be exactly what they want, and others have criticised it and identified its limitations, proposing alternatives. Some have taken the whole theoretical apparatus of situated learning. Others have taken just the phrase and adapted it to their own uses, combining it with concepts from other fields and incorporating it into other theories. For some, it has become a central concept which a whole theory revolves around; for others, it has been more peripheral and has been incorporated into other theories. This is probably the fate of any useful concept.

Examination of current journal publications and simple web searches shows the range of fields where notions of communities of practice are drawn upon. Whilst we will not provide an overall review here, individual chapters draw upon this literature. The concept has been taken up particularly in management, in education and in understanding virtual worlds. It has been most developed practically in business management but has also proved useful to the radical educator and to the political activist. The range of interests in the concept is broad – from religious missionaries using it

to draw up the management frameworks for overseas evangelising
(Goh, Thaxter and Simpson 2003) to social scientists using it to under-
stand contemporary witches (Merriam, Courtenay and Baumgartner
2003).

There are many reasons why the concept has been taken up so
widely. It appears to resolve some pervasive concerns of social sci-
ences about learning. It presents a theory of learning which acknowl-
edges networks and groups which are informal and not the same as
formal structures. It allows for groups which are distributed in some
way and not in face-to-face contact. The overall apparatus of situated
learning is a significant rethink of learning theory of value to any-
one wanting to take learning beyond the individual. It is attractive
as a middle-level theory between structure and agency which is ap-
plicable to and close to actual life and which resonates with detailed
ethnographic accounts of how learning happens. It has proved useful
as a theory and has been of value in practice.

Part of its appeal is that a seemingly natural formation which en-
hances learning can be consciously developed, which is important
for those implementing change. This can be seen within management
sciences, where the concepts fit in easily with work in management
learning, with ideas of there being a New Work Order characterised
by a shift from traditional hierarchical structures to people working
in small, creative and relatively autonomous teams (Gee, Hull and
Lankshear 1996). This implicit linkage between the workplace and
education has been criticised by Gee (2000) analysing how it draws
schools and the new workplace together into a common endeavour.

In education, it takes learning out of the classroom and addresses
the variety of groups and locations where learning takes place, in-
cluding adults learning, learning in the workplace and learning in
everyday life. It helps identify commonalities across these settings
and contributes to understanding differences between formal and
informal education.

In understanding new technologies, it provides ways of talking
about learning in groups formed at a distance and the many va-
rieties of virtual groups. Understanding the strengths and limita-
tions of this concept and its similarities to and distinctiveness from
other groupings, such as speech communities (as in Holmes and

Meyerhoff 1999; Eckert 2000) and, more crucially, discourse communities (Swales 1998, Prior 2003), is important here and is pursued in some of the chapters of this book.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT

A brief historical background shows how the concept has developed. Contemporary work on communities of practice has its roots in Scribner and Cole's original work, where they found a cognitive framework inadequate in accounting for their data on Vai literacy and, drawing on anthropology, they begin to sketch out 'a practice account' (1981, pp. 234–238). This work has developed over the past two decades, particularly in the research associated with Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger. In all of this, one can trace a progression, with a psychological model with the social as a context developing into a model which is essentially social. This development can be clearly seen in books which have been published in this period: Rogoff and Lave (1984); Lave (1988); Lave and Wenger (1991); Chaiklin and Lave (1996); Wenger (1998); and Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002).

Rogoff and Lave's 1984 edited book – *Everyday Cognition: Its Development in Social Context* – like Scribner and Cole's work, was a psychological account rooted in the Vygotskian tradition. Although the set of papers in Rogoff and Lave is interdisciplinary, the overall framing is essentially cognitive. The research covers a range of contexts, mixing the educational with the everyday (including grocery shopping, workplaces and skiing) and emphasising the importance of context in thinking: "thinking is a practical activity which is adjusted to meet the demands of the situation" (1984, p. 7). Lave's 1988 book, *Cognition in Practice: Mind, Mathematics and Culture in Everyday Life,* develops ideas of cognition and practice; and here cognition is viewed as being distributed across people. Practice has become more central as a concept, and there is a definite shift from a cognitive psychological framing to one which is more in tune with social anthropology. The co-authored work by Lave and Wenger in 1991, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation,* explicitly talks of communities of practice: concepts of learning are shifted from apprenticeship, through notions of situated learning to communities of practice. In particular, the notion of communities of practice provides

a set of concepts which view learning as a form of participation in activities. A later collection by Chaiklin and Lave in 1996, *Understanding Practice: Perspectives on Activity and Context,* develops notions of practice by focussing on issues of context and, again, provides rich portraits of everyday practices, including navigation, psychotherapy, artificial intelligence and being a blacksmith. These books provide some historical roots for Wenger's 1998 book, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity,* an elaboration of these earlier ideas, which moves away from Vygotskian roots and draws on a broader background, including anthropology and aspects of social theory. The book identifies communities of practice as the central concept in a theory of learning. Wenger's 1998 book is the main focus for our current book, but reference will also be made to Lave and Wenger (1991) and to Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002), a later work which applies communities of practice to business management. This book takes for granted the neo-liberal narrative of the way that the world is developing, addressing organisations directly and offering advice on the fostering of communities of practice in ways which improve economic competitiveness.

Meanwhile Lave's work has developed some of the issues raised in Chaiklin and Lave (1996), notably in Holland and Lave (2001), which focuses more on subjective experience and identity in relation to participation in practice. They engage with issues of individual and collective identity and struggles for social change, drawing on the work of Bakhtin and Bourdieu as well as Vygotsky. The work associated with Rogoff since the 1984 co-edited book remains more psychological and provides a complementary strand of development. Rogoff (1990) examines the process of guided participation, particularly between children and adults. Rogoff, Turkanis and Bartlett (2001) examine how such learning worked in a particular school and pursue the idea of this particular community as a learning community. Rogoff (2003) develops this into a more general theory of human development where guided participation in communities is central.

This overview provides important background for some of the chapters of this book. Several other parallel fields – such as the developments in activity theory, sociolinguistic work on context and the contribution of the journal *Mind, Culture and Activity* – would also need to be included in a full account of these developments.

Our own interest as linguists is that framings provided by theories of language, literacy, discourse and power are central to understandings of the dynamics of communities of practice, but they are not brought out in Wenger's formulations. We set out to be critical of the concept of *communities of practice* as described by Wenger. On initial close reading of the book, we were frustrated that we could not pin down the components of the theory, and we found concepts slippery and elusive. More broadly, we were concerned that the critical edge of earlier work had been lost, that the contribution of Jean Lave had been eclipsed and that the ideas were being taken over by the certainty and oversimplifications of management training. We aimed to deconstruct the concept in the book in a straightforward academic way and to propose an alternative vision. There were various ideas we wanted to develop, coming from social linguistics, discourse studies, literacy theory and social theory more generally.

In doing this, we remain respectful of the book. It has a richness of vision and a clarity of expression. There are wonderful turns of phrase and incisive observations throughout. It ranges over theories of learning and theories of meaning and contributes to social theory. It is at ease in the space between the social and the psychological. It does understand its limitations and does point to the areas which need development. Many of the ideas we want to develop are to be found already sketched out in subsections and footnotes of the book. Space remains for us to explore, critique and develop the concepts, and we do this, mindful of the strengths of the work.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

The ten chapters of this book address a variety of areas which tend to be overlooked within the theory of communities of practice as it is often currently taken up, including theories of language, literacy and discourse; issues around power, resistance and inequality; micro-interactional and sociolinguistic takes on negotiation of meaning, tension and conflict; multilingual and other hybrid situations and theories of risk and stigma. Some of the chapters draw on empirical research in a variety of settings, and others explore the ideas on a theoretical level.

In the first chapter, David Barton and Mary Hamilton develop the notion of reification from the perspective of literacy studies. They demonstrate the centrality of literacy to Wenger's data, drawing out from the descriptive vignettes in Wenger (1998) those elements which are relevant to key concepts in literacy studies. This reveals the textually mediated nature of the social worlds described and shows the potential contribution of literacy studies to developing communities of practice theory. They go on to engage with a range of social theory which examines the role of stable but portable entities which cross contexts in social life, suggesting that the work of thinkers such as Ron Scollon, Bruno Latour, Dorothy Holland and Dorothy Smith can fruitfully be drawn on to develop both literacy studies and communities of practice theory and that a focus on reification is one key way of linking macro-level and mid-level social theory.

Karin Tusting develops a related point in the second chapter, drawing out the implicit significance of language within communities of practice theory, particularly in relation to the concept of negotiation of meaning. She suggests that any theory which places participation and reification at its heart needs to conceptualise how language is part of these processes, since it is one of the key means by which we communicate. By re-examining some of the examples used in Wenger (1998), she demonstrates the centrality of language in the practices described. She argues that research in communities of practice needs a theoretical model of language, and one which enables the researcher to analyse language as part of social practice. She outlines a model from critical social linguistics which offers this capability. This is a theory which draws out the links between language and other elements of the social world, enabling us to look at the way power relationships are played out and maintained through language use in communities of practice.

Angela Creese's chapter continues the focus on language. She draws on data from an ethnographic study of a high school, comparing the insights that can be gained from looking at the school as a "community of practice" to those which come from seeing it as a "speech community", and drawing attention to the lack of a theory of language-in-use in the theory of communities of practice. Creese shows how the ethnography of communication, with its focus on the

interpersonal function of language as well as its referential one, is more powerful in enabling the researcher to describe the complexity of positions taken up around social events. She examines texts produced as part of a protest organised by some students in a multilingual school setting, describing a struggle over the legitimacy of the girls' protests, which centres on whether they are positioned within or outside the boundaries of the school community, defined in terms of an "equal opportunities discourse" which the protesting girls are perceived not to be using. Seeing the school as a "speech community" enabled her to examine which discourses were privileged and which silenced in the school, contributing to an understanding of how power relations and conflict were created and sustained – an understanding which would be difficult to reach using communities of practice theory alone.

Frances Rock presents more sociolinguistic evidence, from a study of the statement and explanation of the right to silence for people under police arrest in the UK, to show further ways in which a focus on language can enrich the communities of practice approach. She demonstrates how membership of communities of practice is accomplished and ratified through talk, and how looking at language processes in this detailed way reveals the diversity and multiple patterns of officers' community memberships. She draws on interviews with officers and recordings of actual practice, examining the way processes of negotiating joint enterprise and mutual engagement are played out through language and describing the role of language in learning the community's shared repertoire. She analyses one detailed example to show the different ways these resources are used and transformed in practice. She then examines what this sociolinguistic data can bring to the concept of the 'community of practice', showing the influence of broader police-level initiatives on local communities, and the multiplicity of communities which exist within the police as a whole and to which any given officer may belong. This bringing to light of diversity, in both Creese's and Rock's accounts, shows how a focus on language use can challenge assumptions about homogeneity which remain implicit in much communities of practice work – a thread which is continued in the next chapter.

The first four chapters all draw out in different ways the value of developing a model of language use within communities of practice

theory. In the fifth chapter, Maria Clara Keating develops this focus on language and discourse, extending it to include situated activity theory. A focus on activity complements the focus on practice, the 'person in the doing' in Keating's phrase recalling Holland and Lave's work on 'history in person', while showing how communities of practice are situated in broader social and discursive orders, and how the negotiations involved in the process of participation are discursive, semiotic and language-based. Keating draws on her own ethnographic research with Portuguese migrant women in London, which looked at their use of language and literacy practices in processes of creating and renegotiating identity. Focussing on discourse within this hybrid migrant situation is very different from looking at the more static communities described in Wenger (1998), since this hybridity brings to light discursive processes of conflict, instability and power negotiations which are easily overlooked in Wenger's model. The linguistic analysis of a research interview with one of the women she worked with shows how discursive activities are loci of tensions and contradictions. She demonstrates how the woman being interviewed drew on resources available to her from multiple communities of practice in her ongoing textual negotiation of self and shows through detailed analysis the discursive dynamics of participation and reification within this event, and how the woman repeats, recognises, reflects upon and recombines reifications in participation.

Deirdre Martin's chapter examines the communities in which a bilingual co-worker in a speech and language therapy department participates as she learns the practices of her job. In this setting, speech and language therapists are inducting the co-worker, through the use of English alone, to work in both Panjabi and English with clients. Martin suggests that sociocultural activity theory offers a theory of learning that accounts better for this innovative social *and* individual process, in which cognitions and skills are distributed across participants, and in which resources come both from the technical knowledge of speech and language therapy and from the tacit knowledge of the bilingual co-worker. In this situation, practices are generated through collaboration – "innovative expanded learning" – rather than being acquired by a newcomer moving into an existing community with established practices. While Lave and Wenger's model accounts well for the process by means of which monolingual assistants are

inducted into the community, it accounts less well for the learning of
bilingual co-workers, who need to draw on resources from a variety of
people and communities, and also create new resources themselves,
in developing their own innovative practices. As with other contrib-
utors to this volume, Martin shows that drawing on activity theory
also allows the researcher to focus on the impact of macro-level so-
cial elements on learning and on the importance of language as a
mediational tool.

Steven Harris and Nicola Shelswell describe the impact of intro-
ducing a communities of practice approach to teaching and learning
in an adult basic education centre. They argue that Wenger's concep-
tion of learning can usefully be developed by drawing on ideas from
cultural historical psychology, activity theory (cf. Keating, this vol-
ume, and Martin, this volume) and critical psychology – approaches
which relate individuals and communities of practice to wider or-
ganisational and societal contexts. While their experience of imple-
menting a design for learning drawing on the principles of commu-
nities of practice theory had many positive outcomes, issues also
emerged around power, conflict, inclusion and exclusion, which are
overlooked in Wenger's (1998) relatively benign model. They intro-
duce concepts of *illegitimate peripheral participation* and *legitimation
conflicts*, in which the legitimacy of a participant is explicitly brought
into question by other members of the community (resonating with
the conflicts over legitimacy and community membership described
in Creese's chapter; see above). Sometimes this renders a participant
increasingly marginal to its practice or even causes his/her complete
withdrawal; at other times, it leads to more positive outcomes for the
people involved. Conflicts also emerged between the development of
communities of practice in the learning setting and the imperative to
keep learning provision open to new participants, and between estab-
lishing communities of learners and individual progression beyond
these communities – showing how becoming a central participant in
a community of practice in the learning situation can bring its own
problems.

Mary R. Lea's chapter continues to examine issues around intro-
ducing communities of practice as a model, this time in a differ-
ent educational setting. She examines the way the concept has been
taken up within Higher Education, in the context of shifts towards a