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Part I

Introduction

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1 The practice of learning

Jean Lave

The problem with "context"

This book grew out of the work of a two-part conference in which the participants came together to consider what we initially

Seth Chaiklin and I initiated this project, but we discussed it with Steinar Kvale very early on and he has been our colleague and advisor on the project ever since. Roger Säljö was exceptionally kind and efficacious in organizing the second meeting of the conference and arranging to fund it through his department at Linköping University, Sweden. The Spencer Foundation generously provided travel support for conference participants. William Schonfeld, dean of the School of Social Sciences at the University of California, Irvine, funded the first meeting. This is just one example of his steady support over the years, for which I am grateful. At UCI, Norma Mendoza did a wonderful job of organizing the whole enterprise. Together, she and Kathy Girvin created the warm ambience that made it a matter of course that fellowship and intellectual openness would prevail.

In the spirit in which all of the authors have written their chapters with the help of "editorial boards" consisting of three other conference participants, Steinar Kvale has read many versions of this introduction, and provided the encouragement without which I might never have finished it. Ole Dreier, Paul Duguid, Martin Packer, Carol Stack, Lucy Suchman, Randall Trigg, and Etienne Wenger have generously given it critical readings. I am grateful also to participants in the 1991 summer course, sponsored by the Qualitative Research Center of Aarhus University under the direction of Steinar Kvale, at Mols Laboratoriet for their thoughtful reading and suggestions for revisions. Thanks are in order to each of them. A special acknowledgment to our editor, Julia Hough, is also in order; her kindness, patience, and insightful encouragement have contributed greatly to the fruition of the project.

Much of the value I have derived from the project has come from collaborating with Seth Chaiklin. In order to make sure that our introductory and concluding chapters give two separate commentaries on the book, we have not read or commented on drafts of each other's chapters. This explains why the introduction does not discuss Seth's closing chapter, and vice versa. The process of writing the introduction is the only part of the conference and the book that has not benefited directly from Seth's deep knowledge and his long, critical view of the historically situated practice of social science research.

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called "the context problem." All of us were involved in research on socially situated activity. We were concerned about conventional limitations on various approaches to the study of activity. In particular, we wished to explore questions about the "socially constituted world" – the context of socially situated activity – that our work often seemed merely to take for granted.

I had tried in previous research to understand how math activity in grocery stores involved being "in" the "store," walking up and down "aisles," looking at "shelves" full of cans, bottles, packages and jars of food, and other commodities. My analyses were about shoppers' activities, sometimes together, and about the relations between these activities and the distractingly material, historically constituted, subjectively selective character of space–time relations and their meaning. Both Seth Chaiklin and I knew that other people conceived of the problem in quite different terms. We decided to hold a collective inquiry into these old, but still perplexing questions (e.g., Bartlett, 1958; Goffman, 1964; Barker, 1963, 1968; Birdwhistell, 1970; and more recently Dannefer, 1991; Haraway, 1988; Rommetveit, 1987, 1988; Hanks, 1990a, 1990b; Goodwin & Duranti, 1992). The time seemed appropriate for such a project, given that theoretical approaches to the study of situated activity, and hence to its situations, had fairly recently become surprisingly diverse and increasingly informed by rich empirical research. The traditions behind the work in this book include activity theory, critical psychology, Barker's ecological psychology, cognitive anthropology, and ethnomethodological perspectives. The contributors include psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists from Sweden, Denmark, Finland, France, Switzerland, and the United States.

We met first without prepared papers in hand, in order to establish the grounds for a broad discussion of our quite different approaches to the study of situated activity. We assembled again several months later to discuss papers drafted in the interim. We then worked for two years more to develop the papers in ways that reflect the impact of these interchanges on our research.

Why would a diverse group of students of the human condition participate over months, and even years, to try to understand each other's perspective? Seth Chaiklin and I initially proposed the following rationale: Theories of situated everyday practice insist that per-

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sons acting and the social world of activity cannot be separated (cf. Minick, 1985). This creates a dilemma: Research on everyday practice typically focuses on the activities of persons acting, although there is agreement that such phenomena cannot be analyzed in isolation from the socially material world of that activity. But less attention has been given to the difficult task of conceptualizing *relations* between persons acting and the social world. Nor has there been sufficient attention to rethinking the "social world of activity" in relational terms. Together, these constitute the problem of context.

The participants in the conference agreed to this set of priorities, with the obvious proviso that relational concepts of the social world should not be explored in isolation from conceptions of persons acting and interacting and their activities. That proviso gradually took on a more central meaning and, as a result, our conception of the common task crystallized into a double focus – on context and, to our surprise, learning. A focus on one provided occasions on which to consider the other. If context is viewed as a social world constituted in relation with persons acting, both context and activity seem inescapably flexible and changing. And thus characterized, changing participation and understanding in practice – the problem of learning – cannot help but become central as well.

It is difficult, when looking closely at everyday activity as the authors in this volume have done, to avoid the conclusion that learning is ubiquitous in ongoing activity, though often unrecognized as such. Situated activity always involves changes in knowledge and action (as Keller & Keller, this volume, argue) and "changes in knowledge and action" are central to what we mean by "learning." It is not the case that the world consists of newcomers who drop unaccompanied into unpeopled problem spaces. People in activity are skillful at, and are more often than not engaged in, helping each other to participate in changing ways in a changing world. So in describing and analyzing people's involvement in practical action in the world, even those authors whose work generally would be least identified with educational foci (e.g., Suchman & Trigg or Keller & Keller, both this volume) are in effect analyzing peoples' engagement in *learning*. We have come to the conclusion, as McDermott suggests (see also Lave & Wenger, 1991) that there is no such thing as

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"learning" sui generis, but only changing participation in the culturally designed settings of everyday life. Or, to put it the other way around, participation in everyday life may be thought of as a process of changing understanding in practice, that is, as learning.

Learning became one focus of our work, even where unintended, partly because of our concern with everyday activity as social and historical process and with the improvisational, future-creating character of mundane practice; partly, also, because those of us whose research has touched on educational questions have come to insist on denaturalizing the social processes that unfold within educational institutions by turning them into analytic objects. So whether the researchers here have approached the problem of context through its temporal dimension, as activity (or practice), or whether they have looked at institutions of learning as contexts, learning has become a central issue.

In the next section a brief description of the chapters provides an opportunity to show how they developed around the issues of context and learning. Next I shall explore at greater length issues concerning the character of learning as situated activity, especially its heterogeneity – the various scopes of social processes (of learning) simultaneously enacted in everyday settings, and their open-ended character. The point is to show how the meaning of "learning" in the research discussed in these chapters differs in significant ways from conventional views of learning. But what, given unconventional conceptions of learning, becomes of the concept of context? The fourth section lays out the views of "context" that assume changing understanding and situated practices to be part and parcel of the lived social world. The discussion of context suggests a problem, however: Conventional theories of learning and schooling appeal to the decontextualized character of some knowledge and forms of knowledge transmission, whereas in a theory of situated activity "decontextualized learning activity" is a contradiction in terms. These two very different ways of conceiving of learning are hardly compatible. Nonetheless, a belief that the world is divided into contextualized and decontextualized phenomena is not merely an academic speculation that can be discarded when found theoretically inadequate or incomplete. This dualistic view of the world has a lively presence in our everyday lives. This dilemma motivates two developments in the

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book: On the one hand, these chapters reflect a growing sense of responsibility for historical explanation of central theoretical traditions; it is not accidental that conventional theory here is treated as part of the activity we are studying, rather than as a contrastive object to be discarded (cf. Chaiklin's concluding chapter). On the other hand, much of the analysis in the book is focused on the mechanisms by which decontextualization practices are generated in situated ways in everyday life.

Craftwork learning and social production

Traditionally, learning researchers have studied learning as if it were a process contained in the mind of the learner and have ignored the lived-in world. This disjuncture, which ratifies a dichotomy of mind and body, sidetracks or derails the question of how to construct a theory that *encompasses* mind and lived-in world. It is not enough to say that some designated cognitive theory of learning could be *amended* by adding a theory of "situation," for this raises crucial questions about the compatibility of particular theories (cf. Soviet psychologists' discussion of the "match" between psychologies and sociologies in the 1920s: Davydov & Radzhikovskii, 1985, p. 49). Nor is it sufficient to pursue a principled account of situated activity armed only with a theory of cognition and good intentions. Without a theoretical conception of the social world one cannot analyze activity in situ. A more promising alternative lies in treating relations among person, activity, and situation, as they are *given* in social practice, itself viewed as a single encompassing theoretical entity. It is possible to detect such a trend in most if not all of the research traditions represented in this collection – these chapters are working toward a more inclusive, intensive development of the socially situated character of activity in theoretically consistent terms.

Theories of situated activity do not separate action, thought, feeling, and value and their collective, cultural-historical forms of located, interested, conflictual, meaningful activity. Traditional cognitive theory is "distanced from experience" and divides the learning mind from the world. This "release" from the narrow confines of body and immediate experience is rejected on varied grounds in the chapters collected here in favor of more complex relations between

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person and world. The idea of learning as cognitive acquisition – whether of facts, knowledge, problem-solving strategies, or metacognitive skills – seems to dissolve when learning is conceived of as the construction of present versions of past experience for several persons acting together (Kvale, 1977; Cole, Hood, & McDermott, 1978; Hutchins, this volume). And when scientific practice is viewed as just another everyday practice (Latour & Woolgar, 1979; Latour, 1987; Suchman, 1987; Lave, 1988), it is clear that theories of "situated activity" provide different perspectives on "learning" and its "contexts."

Participants in the conference agreed, on the whole, on four premises concerning knowledge and learning in practice.

1. Knowledge always undergoes construction and transformation in use.
2. Learning is an integral aspect of activity in and with the world at all times. That learning occurs is not problematic.
3. What is learned is always complexly problematic.
4. Acquisition of knowledge is not a simple matter of taking in knowledge; rather, things assumed to be natural categories, such as "bodies of knowledge," "learners," and "cultural transmission," require reconceptualization as cultural, social products.

David Pear argues that to explore the meaning of "knowledge" you must begin with what is not knowledge (1972); the present book has taken up this strategy as well. The first chapters are about work, which is not usually conceptualized as learning. A number of other chapters are about failure to learn, which is usually assumed to be something other than learning. If learning is taken to be an aspect of everyday practice, however, such distinctions dissolve.

Several themes that emerge in Part II of the book, "Learning craftwork," help to reformulate the meaning of learning. These chapters are concerned with what we have dubbed *craftwork*. They are about adults engaged in culturally, socially, historically defined forms of ordinary, productive activity. "Learning craftwork" includes Hutchins's study of the careers and work practices of navigators on a U.S. Navy helicopter transport ship. Engeström presents his research on changing medical practice in public clinics in Finland, and Dreier discusses his research on therapist–client relations. The work of

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artificial intelligence practitioners, viewed as craft practice, is the focus of Suchman and Trigg's chapter, while the craft of blacksmithing is the topic of Keller and Keller's. Fuhrer examines the uncommon hazards of unfamiliar activity for newcomers to a career placement center who are trying to track down information about jobs in an unfamiliar setting. The settings for these studies lie outside conventional educational institutions, and away from the usual research populations of children and other academic novices; they focus on prosaic everyday practices.

It should be said that the conceptions of craftwork in most of the chapters bear little resemblance to the small-scale problem-solving tasks typical of cognitive learning research: Forging a cooking utensil, or taking part in the work of a national university examination committee are substantial, meaningful forms of activity. In all cases the work described takes on meaning from its broader interconnections with(in) other activity systems.

Authors in Part II of the book have (re)conceptualized what might be meant by learning-in-practice. They address the question, "if people learn in activity in the seamless way suggested by investigations of situated activity, how does this come about?" They begin by shifting from terms such as *learning* (given its traditionally narrow connotations) to concepts more akin to *understanding* and *participation in ongoing activity*. *Understanding* is assumed to be a partial and open-ended process while at the same time there is structure (variously conceived) to activity in the world. Thus, the indeterminacy and open-endedness of understanding are not viewed as infinite or random. Finally, authors argue that knowledge and learning will be found distributed throughout the complex structure of persons-acting-in-setting. They cannot be pinned down to the head of the individual or to assigned tasks or to external tools or to the environment, but lie instead in the relations among them.

Paradoxically, learning craftwork may appear easy in the chapters in Part II, whereas in Part III it often seems nearly impossible to learn in settings dedicated to education. But appearances are deceptive: Studies in the second half of the book suggest that it is as easy to learn to fail in school as it is to learn to navigate a ship. On the other hand, the studies in Part II show that what people are learning to do is difficult, complex work. The learning is not a separate

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process, nor an end in itself. If it seems effortless, it is because in some sense it is invisible.

If learning-in-practice is ubiquitous, what are we to make of educational institutions, formal methods of learning and teaching, and of failure to learn? Part III of the book, "Learning as social production," explores different approaches to the analysis of institutionalized education, to learning identities *as a process,* to learning identities *as products,* to teaching, and to participants' beliefs about knowledge and the everyday world. These chapters focus on how institutional arrangements (such as schools) generate "learners," "learning," and "things to be learned" – in practice. They analyze the processes by which these products of situated activity are socially produced.

Part III focuses on Western cultural institutionalized arrangements for learning and failing to learn. Success and failure at learning are viewed, not as attributes of individuals, but as specialized social and institutional arrangements. There is a strong emphasis on the problematic and differentiated character of what gets learned (e.g., Säljö & Wyndhamn; Kvale); it depends on the subjective and intersubjective interpretation of the how and why of ongoing activity. National examination systems, placement processes for children nominated for special education, and learning disabilities are analyzed respectively by Kvale, Mehan, and McDermott as what might be called rituals of legitimation or degradation and exclusion. (Latour's analysis of the centralization of control achieved through the mathematization of science offers a complementary analysis of institutional arrangements for knowledge and legitimacy [1986].) Likewise, Levine focuses on the social organization of mild mental retardation, arguing that it is the product of a cultural process of ritualized exclusion of some in the name of a normality that, once turned into a goal, becomes unobtainable (Levine & Langness, 1983). Levine, Säljö and Wyndhamn, and Minick trace the changing meanings of tasks for learners and teachers alike, and build a rich picture of the situated character of knowing, doing, and learning identities for all those involved.

These chapters provide evidence of the *sociocultural* production of failure to learn (Kvale; Levine; McDermott; Mehan; Minick; Säljö & Wyndhamn). They are about how people learn identities and identify the situated meaning of what is to be learned, and the specific shaping of people's identities as learners. Thus, Levine in-

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sists on the sociocultural construction of retardation within the family in terms compatible with Mehan's analysis of a school system's construction of educationally handicapped children. He shows how parents restrict the experience of developmentally delayed children and are silent to them about the general and extended meanings of everyday activities, a theme that resonates through other chapters as well. Kvale argues that university comprehensive examinations are, from one perspective, tests of students, measuring what they have learned or failed to learn. At the same time, the national system is the means by which representatives of academic disciplines, acting in examination committees, establish what will constitute legitimate academic knowledge, and what lies outside its boundaries. Students who fail (and perhaps the most successful as well) are the sacrificial lambs whose fates give material form to legitimate knowledge. Further evidence that school accomplishments (including failure) are situated and collective is to be found in demonstrations that a child's "handicap" may be reformulated when it turns out to be incompatible with class scheduling requirements (Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1986), and in McDermott's argument that learning disabilities acquire the child, rather than the other way around. McDermott argues that people are so knowledgeably experienced in detecting, diagnosing, highlighting, and otherwise contributing to the generation of such identities that the society produces its quota of nonactors, or flawed actors, as they participate in the everyday world. As for identifying the meaning of things-to-be-learned, understanders' "conceptions," Säljö and Wyndhamn (also Säljö, 1982) demonstrate the different meanings students assign to a single task when the task is embedded in different situational frameworks. Minick explores early attempts of primary-school teachers to induct children into a distinctive form of school discourse. These authors provide evidence that tasks are viewed differently, and responded to differently, with characteristic variations in success and failure, when things to be learned are situated differently.

Relations with theory past: Some paradoxes and silences of cognitive theory

Silences and paradoxes are generated in any theoretical problematic: questions that cannot be asked and issues for which no

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