

Prologue

The Difference We Care to Make

We are social learning theorists and practitioners. Our theoretical perspectives have been adopted in many fields, sectors, and organizations. Over this time, they have also evolved through use and conceptual refinement. It is time to produce an updated statement – something we will do with a series of books.

We are calling this series *Learning to Make a Difference*. This is because we hope that our work will have this effect for those who use it. It is also because we are working on it while learning to make a difference ourselves. We are therefore using the expression in its double sense: learning *in order to* make a difference and learning *how to* make a difference.

We want to make learning front and center of public discourse. We want to shift how people think of learning. We want to rescue it from the backwaters. Many people we talk to associate learning with teaching or training, reading or searching the web: transmitting what is known from someone who knows to someone who doesn't. But as important as it is to learn what is already known, this is not the main concern of our times. On its own, this kind of learning is not agile or imaginative enough to deal with the complex and fast-changing challenges of today. A learning theory for today should be addressing situations where there is some urgency to engage people who care to make a difference; what needs to be learned about making that difference is not yet known; knowing in practice involves being able to function productively under conditions of uncertainty; and learning depends on paying attention to how things play out.

Joining Forces

We have both been involved in this enterprise for years, but through different paths. Etienne has been working on social learning since he was invited to join the Institute for Research on Learning in Palo Alto in 1987, where he and Jean Lave started to write about communities of practice.

Much of Beverly's work has been in leading projects with a social-learning approach, even before she called it that. She has been an activist for equitable development, a consultant and facilitator in cross-national initiatives, and a researcher on practice-based pedagogy in higher education in Portugal. Since we became a team in work and life in 2008, the intersections of our interests have crystallized in this notion of learning to make a difference.

The joys and tribulations of working together create a synergy that keeps surprising us, generating insights and ideas that we would not have had on our own. After multiple iterations and refinements, these get channeled into our work and our writing. While we both continue to learn from each other, we also make distinct contributions to our joint writing. Etienne's obsession with theoretical elegance and Bev's commitment to feminism and global justice still remain salient in relation to each other. But they become impossible to disentangle once conversation upon conversation and draft after draft merge them into text.

Our Method

This calls for a comment on the way we work. Our book is not an empirical study, our theory is not a claim to truth based on systematic data collection. It is the crafting of a language, a way of talking about learning that is meant to be useful. But it is not mere theoretical musing. It is anchored in our own experience of practice and that of people we work with. The resulting conceptual framework is both a theoretical perspective and a source of practical guidance.

We are not academic researchers in the traditional sense, but more something like practitioner-theorists. We welcome doing empirical work or participating in academic seminars when we have a chance. However, our main method consists in getting involved in practical social-learning projects.

We consider ourselves privileged. Our consulting, workshops, and retreats give us singular glimpses into distinct worlds in wide-ranging contexts, in different countries, and across all sectors. We work with people – often underestimated by their organizations, but respected by those whose lives they enhance – who are doing extraordinary things in everyday situations. They are usually persistent, ambitious, and pragmatic all rolled into one, making tiny changes that add up to big ones and big changes that lead to a myriad of small ones.

Our clients don't work with us because we build theories. They usually come to us because of our reputation for strategizing, facilitating, and evaluating social learning. But they are the people who, knowingly or not, help us develop the theory. How will our theory land with them and contribute to what they are doing? What further tools and language would be helpful? What are they doing that we haven't thought of? What questions are they asking that our current framework does not cover? We are hungry to know. Practice is where we engage our uncertainties and test ideas; we learn by paying attention to the effect we have. We use this as a kind of theory-practice crucible. Trying to serve practice is the way we come up with theoretical insights, ideas, and concepts. We refine (or discard) them by testing what helps the people we work with make sense of their challenges and think about ways to address them.

All of these things – learning to make a difference, working in partnership with others, and paying attention to what happens to theory in practice – constitute our own social learning space. In-between projects writing is a luxury that we relish – and agonize over – as an integral part of that joint learning space. We live a self-referential loop: developing social learning theory by applying the theory to the development of the theory in practice.

Our Sense of Urgency

While we keep a moderate tone in the book, we take advantage of the prologue to jump up and down and write in bright neon: we need a different learning theory for the twenty-first century – and it will have to be a social learning theory. We need to learn to live together on a small planet, where we don't know what's going to happen next and where the survival of our species appears to be at stake.

It's 2020. There is political turmoil internationally. Tribalism is on the rise. All and nothing are on offer for a new generation. We can't even guess what twists and turns are ahead, or if the ending is a happy or a tragic one. The clock is ticking. We need a theory, forged on the anvil of practice, that we can use to advance individuals, groups, communities, and organizations caring to make a difference.

In the subtitle of the book we refer to learning as creating value. As we explain in the final reflection in Part I, our theory refrains from defining in general what counts as value, as “the good,” or as “good” learning. This is something participants in social learning spaces have to decide. We as

individuals, however, definitely have values. Our ethical stance is one that values diversity and dialogic respect. We work in service of a world where conditions are in place for all humans to flourish, and where flourishing includes having agency: the power to make a difference.

If you want to learn to make a difference, any difference, then this series is for you. You don't have to agree with our values to find its perspective useful. You just need to care to make a difference, or care to enable others to make a difference. And whatever difference you care to make, we are eager to hear how you have used our work and the difference it has made.