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Legitimate Peripheral Participation: Learning Reconceived as a Transformation of Social Identity

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Abstract

This chapter responds to a critical and often overlooked dimension of the graduate education of professionals. It presents an approach to teaching and learning that is fully compatible with performance-based ideas and a focus on outcomes, while incorporating the perspective of the profession as a social entity.

Introduction

To belong in a profession or any other definable community of practice entails more than familiarity with a particular domain of knowledge or even the mastery of a set of competencies. Belonging to a profession also entails a transformation of social identity. An *initiation* into a community of practice is required. In the case of education, for example, the person is not only learning about pedagogy, he or she is *becoming* a teacher. From this perspective, learning is fundamentally a sociocultural phenomenon and cannot be separated from participation in the social world of practice.

The concept of *legitimate peripheral participation* addresses how this transformation is typically carried out by communities of practice and by implication, how such a transformation can most effectively be refined and contributed to by postsecondary educational institutions (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 2002).

Situated Learning

Legitimate peripheral participation in action was first described by Wenger and Lave based on their work with claims adjusters in a large insurance corporation (Wenger, 1998). Like many organizations, the insurance company had a training department made up of specialists in education and training. Despite the evident expertise of the trainers, the company had been finding that its training programs were notably unsuccessful, as well as less than valued by participants. Wenger and his colleague, Lave, asked the question, "If adjusters are not learning in the courses and workshops provided, how are they learning, if at all?"

A social anthropologist, Jean Lave's earlier research on apprenticeship sensitized her to the participatory and social dimensions of learning. Informed by this lens, Wenger and Lave found an ongoing, on-the-ground, highly *situated* process of learning and a complex network of informal instructional resources (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Adjusters were learning, but not in the way the organization had imagined. Learning was primarily taking place through adjusters' participation in their work guided by more experienced adjusters and by *informal* experts in this community of practice who were themselves adjusters

and could be reliably turned to as sources of information, practice, and encouragement.

As it initiated new members, the community of practice demonstrated an awareness of a gradual and incremental learning process taking place through engagement in the work itself. New adjusters were understood to be capable of responding to certain claims and not others. As in apprenticeship, work was assigned to new adjusters that enabled their engagement in the practice at a level commensurate with their competency. Over time the ante was raised and more complex claims assigned. It was this graduated inclusion and associated mastery over time that resulted in Wenger and Lave's use of the term "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1998). It points to a journey that resembles apprenticeship (Lave & Wenger, 1998) because it entails higher levels of participation in the work of a community of practice over time. Intellectual, linguistic, and ethical refinements take place as a person moves from neophyte or prospective practitioner to full membership in a community of practice through successive elevations in status. This kind of learning does not lend itself solely to the dissemination of abstract frameworks, but also to conversation, storytelling, coaching, and "learning by example."

Wenger and Lave also noticed another kind of learning that was taking place as new adjusters became more and more a part of the scene and moved from *novice* to *ordained* status. They were clearly picking up on a whole spectrum of, what has become known as, *tacit knowledge* (Polanyi, 1966). This knowledge ranged from the colloquial terminology used to categorize claims to correct behavior in the lunchroom. There was a transmission of lore from experienced practitioners to new learners that was enabling successive degrees of inclusion in the community of practice. The new practitioners moved from outsider to insider and from a conditional kind of acceptance to recognized membership in the community. In the context of their working lives, they *became* claims adjusters.

This is a different version of learning than one in which viable knowledge is assumed to be cognitive and expressible primarily in academic terms. The view of learning as fundamentally a transformation of identity through participation in a community of practice is more social and less individualistic and more performance-focused and less intellectual, though the effect on the individual and the significance of intellectual development is by no means diminished. In this view, cognitive frameworks play

a mediating and enabling rather than formative role. This socially *transformative* view emphasizes the importance of *epistemological correctness*. Epistemological correctness, as Wenger and Lave employ the term, implies that learning should be organized in a way that is congruent with how people learn in the context of a given community of practice (Wenger, 1998, p. 100).

At the Interface

The critical interface in relation to counselor knowledge and practice, for example, takes place when the counselor meets with an individual, group, or family in need of assistance. Can you imagine being a beginning therapist and facing your first family? The following scenario about this experience reflects the relevance of the ideas discussed in this article at that interface:

David and Nila, Nila's mother Raminder, and their two sons Ujal and Suk are waiting in the family therapy room as you arrive. They are twenty minutes early for their first appointment. David is Caucasian, and Nila and Raminder are from the Punjab area of India. Ujal, thirteen years old, peers intently at his iPhone, and Suk, eleven, is talking in a loud voice in Punjabi to his mother. Raminder tries to no avail to interrupt what is very quickly becoming an argument between mother and son. David looks tense and angry, but does nothing.

Who are you going to speak to, and what are you going to say? Family therapy theories dance around in your head. Initially based on cybernetics and increasingly incorporating postmodern ideas, family therapy theories are complex and elegant, and there are a lot of them. If you haven't learned family therapy as performance and if you don't experience some sense of yourself as a bona fide therapist, you will not know what to do. Your polite but ineffectual responses will be swept up in the well-rehearsed family drama that is already playing out.

Suk doesn't want to be here and he doesn't see why he has to. Ujal is the problem. He has been refusing to go to school for weeks. David and Nila don't know how to collaborate in handling the situation, not to speak of dealing with Raminder's constant interference.

Yes, you know a lot about family therapy. You have read the latest research about families with problems, as well as being able to sketch out in some detail the parameters of several theories about family therapy, but what to do?

It is never going to be easy to face the complex, dynamic, and often multicultural realities presented by contemporary families, but it does help to have participated in a performance-based learning process with experienced practitioners. You have some feeling for what to do and experience some confidence that you can step in, forestall the drama that is beginning to unfold, and lead the conversation in a productive direction. The family has enacted this drama many times; it is not going to help them to do it another time.

An Epistemologically Correct Way to Educate Practitioners

Since the education of practitioners should address how practitioners "learn" the practice, practitioner programs must include all of a mastery of a practice, acquisition of a body of knowledge, and a high level of integration of theory and practice. They should also incorporate the transmission of tacit knowledge and a means of affecting increasing identification as a professional. Epistemologically correct programs should be organized in ways that reflect successively greater opportunities to engage in practice, and experienced practitioners should be engaged in instruction. Graduates should not be put in the position of *beginning to learn the practice* after graduation.

In relation to successively greater opportunities to engage in practice, the inclusion of case studies, practice-related experiential exercises, and simulations in course work followed by supervised internships should be emphasized. The inclusion of internships also imposes an ethical constraint that relates to how practitioner education should be organized. Educators have to be sure that interns have achieved sufficient levels of competence and ethical sensitivity to do no harm to clients. Accordingly, practitioner-focused programs should require that students pass practice-focused comprehensive exams or comparable competency-based assessments prior to their engagement in internships. Further assurance is provided by high levels of oversight from field supervisors.

In postsecondary education, the concept of instruction by practitioners or *scholar/practitioners* is known, but very much limited to professional schools in fields such as medicine and law and, in some instances, arts education. The conventional view, particularly in regulatory contexts, is that the use of practitioners, as instructors, risks depriving students of up-to-date academic knowledge and research-based findings. The status of research-based scholarly and academic knowledge is epistemologically privileged in this view. Though it is perhaps a valid priority in the context of preparing academicians and researchers, it is at odds with how people learn practices such as counseling and educational leadership. It is a limiting view in environments in which the primary goal is the preparation of practitioners because it fails to address the imperative to equip graduates with the competencies, knowledge, and ethical sensitivities to engage in professional practice, as well as a feeling of membership in the community of practice.

From the perspective of a situated understanding of learning and the critical phenomenon of legitimate peripheral participation, the conventional view promotes *practice distant instruction*, which leaves graduates in the position of having to begin to master the practice and join the community of practice at the point of graduation. New graduates have to be trained by those who employ their services. Adding internships at the end of a program taught largely by academics and not practitioners does not fully compensate for the process of systematically developing the performance of practice throughout the program. The conventional approach also inadvertently promotes instruction by recent doctoral graduates with little experience or by faculty whose preference is to engage in research and publication rather than teaching and practice. The conventional view typically underestimates the engagement of preeminent practitioners in learning emerging theory, research, and practice on an ongoing basis and their wide-ranging contributions to knowledge development. It assumes that source of significant knowledge is primarily academic and risks depriving significant fields of endeavor such as counseling and educational leadership of *practice-informed knowledge* and ironically, impels a schism between practice and scholarly activity that in the end undermines the relevance and importance of scholarly activity. A reflection of this schism is an almost unilateral disregard of scholarly activity and publication by practitioners. This disregard further highlights the potential significance of scholar/practitioners as bridge builders between the otherwise partitioned communities of the academy and practitioners.

The engagement of scholar/practitioners in postsecondary education enhances the relevance of instruction, adds a greater awareness of the safety of clients and the community, and contributes to the employability of graduates. Scholar/practitioners are members of a community of practice who have intellectual and research-attuned interests and want to create a context to share these interests with students and with one another. The concepts of situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation help to understand and further refine instruction by scholar/practitioners and programs that are designed for practitioners.

The Role of the University

A view of education that incorporates transforming social identity through sequential inclusion in practice changes a number of dimensions of education. Students are seen as colleagues from the outset, and their status as present or future members of a community of practice is explicitly recognized. For example, initial contact with a new cohort of students is considered as much a welcoming of new members of a community as it is an orientation. Community development, as well as academic points of view, inform program management. Creating a harmonious community is a significant part of program delivery, and, consistent with the findings of situated learning, the program supports the many ways in which students learn from one another and the ways faculty learn from students. The program provides multiple opportunities for students to work together on projects and assignments.

A sensitivity to the inclusion of students in a community of practice results in a different understanding of curriculum. Curriculum is a contract between the university and the community of practice, and between the university and the society that it seeks to serve. As such, the curriculum is essentially situated and cannot be “considered in isolation, manipulated in arbitrary didactic terms, or analyzed apart from the social relations that shape legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 97). Program and course outcomes are expressly directed at equipping students for the performance of specific competencies and membership in the community of practice. And ultimately, it invites thinking of universities anew—it invites seeing the university from community development, as well as academic and research points of view. How can the university

become a valued center of dialogue and lifelong learning for specific communities of practice and its community and environment as a whole?

The concepts of situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation help in formulating the ways in which the university can more effectively serve communities of professional practice and incorporate scholar/practitioners as instructors. Situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation represent an understanding of learning that is congruent with acquiring the competencies and ethical sensibilities required of professional practice as an essential aspect of postsecondary education and provide a means of introducing the integration of theory and practice by including participation in practitioner-informed practice from the outset of and throughout the program. These concepts also lead to an integration of learning and community that invites a seamless continuation of learning from degree-focused programs to lifelong learning via continuing education.

While recognizing the value and legitimacy of other forms of postsecondary education, the role of the postsecondary institution in the context of the graduate education of practitioners is to become a “good host” for the mutual learning of aspiring members and seasoned practitioners and the evolution of particular communities of practice. The institution’s objective is to serve its constituent communities of practice well so that they, in turn, can contribute to the well-being of individuals, families, and communities. The “engaged university” provides a supportive and hospitable environment in which accomplished practitioners can teach, perform research, and share their realization with aspiring practitioners and the community of practice. The objective of the “engaged university” is to create a robust intellectual commons for the professions and shape this commons in a way that consciously serves the community. It listens to the community in which it is situated and responds to the community in terms of what it has heard. How can we eliminate homelessness in our community? How can we face increasing health-care costs as our population demographics continue to shift dramatically? How do we help people make sense of life in the twenty-first century and contribute to the shaping of a better world?

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