A CONSTRUCTIVE CRITIQUE OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: MOVING BEYOND LAVE AND WENGER

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INTRODUCTION

Lave and Wenger’s (1991) seminal work on learning has become something of an iconic text in the workplace learning field. It is incredibly widely cited, but opinions about the work tend to polarise, between those who adopt aspects of it fairly uncritically, and those who largely reject it, as being either inadequate or, more charitably, past its sell by date. In this paper we argue that though this work remains fundamentally important to our understanding of learning, there is a need to build on and move beyond it, in order to deal with some enduring challenges for the workplace learning literature as a whole and some gaps and weaknesses in the original text, which have become apparent over the years and are not, in our view, adequately dealt with in Wenger’s (1998, Wenger et al., 2002) subsequent work. In presenting this hopefully constructive critique, we will concentrate on the concept of communities of practice. However, we will also pay brief attention to legitimate peripheral participation, which had greater prominence in the original book.

One of the main reasons why Lave and Wenger’s work remains important is that it offers us a starting framework from which to address some of the major challenges faced by the workplace learning literature. In indicating what six of these challenges are, we are taking a deliberately broad-brush approach, with no attempt to do a full literature review.

1). To incorporate wider issues of social and economic inequalities beyond the actual site of learning, fully into the analysis of learning.

When researchers approach workplace learning from a social/cultural perspective, there is a tendency to concentrate on the structures, culture and contexts of the workplace itself. Whilst this is clearly of great significance, that literature pays much less attention to wider social and economic inequalities, within which the workplace and the workers are enmeshed. Put differently, there is a gap between much of the literature on workplace learning and that on either the sociology of work, or on studies of social inequalities and disadvantage in wider society. Thus, the significance of ethnicity, social class and gender in structuring both opportunities to learn at work, and the dispositions of the workers and managers in work, are under-played. This is particularly odd, given the significance of worker identity in parts of that literature. One important approach to build in these wider inequalities can be found in the life history work of researchers at Roskilde University, led by Henning Salling Olesen (2001) and Kirsten Weber (2001). Also, Rainbird et al (2004) show how employment relations affect learning, but are significant at three levels: as well as the working group, the others are the organisation (which may a multi-national corporation) and the state – for example through labour law and policies which structure the education and training systems.

2). To blend what is known about the impact of power differentials in relation to access to learning into our understanding of social learning processes.

This links with the previous problem. Put simply, there is an extensive literature that addresses issues of unequal access to learning at work. It is well known that learning opportunities increase with job status, and are at their lowest for some manual, supposedly low-skilled, workers. However, this knowledge, together with the mechanisms whereby these inequalities arise, are seldom fully built in to literatures that explicitly address the social processes of learning at work, as Rainbird et al. (2004) point out. Billett’s (2001, 2004) recent work has attempted to address this, focussing on what he terms affordances at work. Activity theorists such as Engestrom (1999, 2001) include rules and divisions of labour in their triangular analyses, and recent work in England, of which we were part, identified three linked themes in workplace learning, one of
which was the impact of regulatory frameworks and government policy on workplace learning (Rainbird, et al., In Press). Nevertheless, in our view, more remains to be done.

3). Integrating individual learners into social theorising about learning.

As Hager (In Press) makes clear, there have been two quite different approaches to workplace learning in the recent past. Originally, much of the focus was on the ways in which individual workers learned, for example in the work of Argyris and Schon (1974, 1978). This approach was largely displaced by the current fashion for more social, cultural or activity-based analyses. The challenge is to build the individual back, whilst retaining this social view of learning. Heather Hodkinson will focus on this issue in more detail, in her seminar in the 18th May.

4). Replacing and moving beyond the common but mistaken assumption that informal and formal learning are distinctly different types of learning, where the former is often assumed to be inherently superior to the latter.

This view arguably originates in a seminal paper by Scribner and Cole (1973), and the text by Lave and Wenger was itself a major contributor to this view. However, the fundamental principles within Lave and Wenger’s approach can help us sidestep this dilemma, and see how both formal and informal attributes of learning are significant in different ways, in particular learning settings.

5). Adequately addressing the fact that workplace learning processes can be very effective in promoting poor or unethical practice.

Taken as a whole, the workplace learning literature is good at explaining how learning occurs at work. However, within much of it lies an implicit assumption that learning is good, and more/better learning is an ideal to be striven for. In rightly avoiding what Sfard (1998) terms acquisition views of learning, relatively little attention is paid to what is learnt. Yet in many workplaces relatively poor working practices are regularly learned very effectively. Similarly, in some workplaces values and beliefs that many would regard as unethical, such as sexism or racism, are routinely learned – at least in the sense that they are further entrenched and reinforced.

6). Examining off-the -job learning/training from a social/participatory perspective.

The founders of a socio-cultural look at learning, including Lave and Wenger, concentrated on two prime issues. The first was the discovery that many people could learn without any formal education or training. The second was an attack on some of the significant but previously ignored inadequacies within so-called formal learning, and the cognitive theories of learning that were closely associated with them. Possibly as a side effect of these two necessary developments, there has been a recent tendency to overlook the role of off the job learning in relation to workplace learning. Yet, for many jobs and professions, off the job learning is still significant.

The potential in Lave & Wenger’s work to help overcome these weaknesses, and key strengths in their approach.

Despite the fact that Lave and Wenger’s work lies at the root of some of these problems, we argue that it still provides us with significant insights that can contribute towards their solution. At this stage, we identify some fundamental strengths in their approach, which lie deeper than their two major concepts – communities of practice and legitimate peripheral participation.

Firstly, in ways that pre-echo the more recent work of Beckett and Hager (2002), Lave and Wenger deal with learners as holistic entities. By this we do not mean to imply some crude enlightenment sense of an essential being, but simply that they see learning as embodied, with no split between reason and emotion, mind and body. However, particularly and significantly, they go beyond Beckett and Hager, in making clear that a ‘whole’ person is also inherently social. That
is, we cannot separate off the learner from their social being and setting. It is this insight which, we will argue, led to some of their more macro-claims about communities of practice, and which also opens up ways to address issues of social structure and social inequalities in workplace learning.

Next, as is well known, they are amongst a number of writers who make clear that there is no separation between learning and social practice, or between either and the context where they take place. Thus they state,

In our view, learning is not merely situated in practice – as if it were some independently reifiable process that just happened to be located somewhere; learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world. (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.35)

Furthermore, learning & social practice are seen as relational. That is, they are determined by a complex amalgam of factors, each of which changes if others change, in relation to each other. This approach combines structure and agency perspectives, and is an effective way of avoiding reductionism, or the identification of some ‘prime cause’, from which other variables derive. Though other approaches to learning share much of this characteristic, Lave and Wenger are unusual in stating this explicitly, with a brief reference to Bourdieu’s work – a link which we will expand upon later in the paper. Like most other recent writers about workplace learning, Lave and Wenger see learning as a (re)constructive and participatory process, rather than the acquisition of knowledge, skills or abilities.

These strengths meant that in a recent UK research network on workplace learning, two of the projects found elements of Lave and Wenger’s work of great value in making sense of the data we had collected. We found it helpful to see the subject departments in English secondary schools as communities of practice where teachers learned, and will return to this work later. Both we and, more especially, Fuller and Unwin, found the concept of legitimate peripheral participation helpful in explaining the learning of apprentices in the steel industry, of student or new teachers, and also of teachers who moved to a different school, for example for promotion (Fuller et al, In Press). The latter concept did need some amendment, however. For example, deliberate pedagogical activity was significant, in ways largely overlooked in Lave and Wenger’s study. Also, when a senior person changes organisation, they are both peripheral and also central at the same time, as the experiences of a school head of department showed. Finally, some workers can experience legitimate peripheral participation in reverse, as it were. One of the teachers in our study became progressively more peripheral/marginal to the department and the school, as our research progressed.

Some short comings in Lave & Wenger’s work.

Despite these substantial strengths, and no doubt partly because of the short length of the original book, there are some serious weaknesses in Lave and Wenger’s work. We are not the first people to identify some of these weaknesses, and in what follows we fully acknowledge other writers, but in a general sense. We do not have space to accurately attribute each critical insight. Firstly, we address the Lave and Wenger (1991) text, and then the subsequent (1998) work by Wenger alone. To avoid duplication, we are not going to repeat the more general challenges to the literature, which have already been identified.

LAVE AND WENGER (1991)

For us, the most obvious difficulty with this book is an exaggerated emphasis on legitimate peripheral participation as the prime learning process in all situations. Like so many other writers about learning, Lave and Wenger concentrate on the learning of newcomers – in almost all cases, young newcomers. For such learners, as we have already argued, the concept of legitimate
peripheral participation retains much that is of value (see Fuller et al., in press, for a more detailed analysis of this issue). However, it is much less effective in explaining the learning of more experienced workers. The claim, towards the end of the book, that such workers learn by themselves becoming peripheral again: ‘everyone’s participation is legitimately peripheral in some respect’ (p. 117), does not ring true, and did not fit the evidence in the studies our network was concerned with. Thus, what is presented as the over-arching concept now has to be seen as a valuable, but not central part of the theorising.

There are two, linked problems with the ways in which Lave and Wenger use the concept of communities of practice, which we examine in greater detail, later. Firstly, despite claims that such communities exist, they fail to describe or analyse communities of practice that are either spatially or socially fragmented. Secondly, and more fundamentally, there is an internal contradiction in the book about whether membership of a community of practice is a prime condition for all learning, or whether communities of practice represent certain conditions in which some learning can flourish. The significance of these two contrasting meanings, and the ways in which one tends to undermine the other, will be more fully analysed later. One further problem that arguably stems from this confusion is that they largely overlook the fact that for some workers, membership in the workplace has relatively little personal significance (some contract workers, for example).

We have already identified some remaining problems: they present too negative a view of ‘formal’ learning in educational settings. Additionally, their book underplays significant elements of deliberate pedagogy in the workplace (Billett, 2001b, 2004, Fuller et al, in press) and overlooks the significance of links and/or tensions between on and off the job learning, in many contemporary workplaces.

WENGER (1998)

Whilst directly addressing some of the gaps in the original book, and responding to much of the criticism of it, Wenger’s later work, as epitomised in his 1998 book, compounds some of these problems, rather than resolving them, and slips away from some of the underlying strengths of the earlier book. For example, he still fails to deal adequately with workers as individuals, despite the explicit focus on identity. This can be seen in his use ‘Ariel’, a cipher, to stand in for all workers in the insurance claims department that represents the only empirical grounding for the book.

Similarly, in meeting criticisms of legitimate peripheral participation, Wenger reverses the stance in the original book. Now he describes legitimate peripheral participation as a variation of the ways in which communities of practice ‘reproduce their membership in the same way as they come about’ (p102), and as simply ‘catching up’. In our view, this new position still fails to address significant differences in the learning of newcomers and more experienced workers or full members of the community.

Finally, in an attempt to meet criticisms that communities of practice were too loosely defined in the earlier book, Wenger produces a much tighter definition, where a community of practice entails mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire of actions. However, he fails to fully address the consequences of this for the wider claims of the earlier book. There is also a confused idealism in the book, when he separates communities of practice, which are essential for learning, from learning communities, where effective (presumably as opposed to ineffective) learning takes place. It is now time to address the issue of communities of practice in more depth.
Two versions of a Community of Practice

Within Lave and Wenger’s work, communities of practice are represented both very broadly, and also much more narrowly. The broader view is stated explicitly in the following quote:

‘A community of practice is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge. … Thus, participation in the cultural practice in which any knowledge exists is an epistemological principle of learning. The social structure of this practice, its power relations, and its conditions for legitimacy define possibilities for learning.’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p98, emphasis added).

This is a big claim, backed up by the rather loose definition of a community of practice, given on the same page: ‘A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice’. However, in the illustrative examples Lave and Wenger give, a community of practice appears to be a close knit group of workers sharing knowledge, tasks, activities and a common physical location.

As the contrast between the examples in the book and this definition shows, when Lave and Wenger (1991) write about learning in communities of practice, the term is ambiguous, for example in relation to scale and applicability. Thus, the accounts of the learning given appear to represent both the particularities of the actual cases described, but also the broader community categories, of West African tailors or midwives, and American quartermasters, master butchers and members of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), that they represent. This is because the knowledge of tailoring or being an AA member involves more than the localised practices of one tailor’s workshop or one AA meeting group.

The contrast between these two meanings leads to a further question. If learning differs in different communities of practice, what aspects of those differences are determined by more macro factors of occupational organisation, structure and purpose – the large-scale version of a community - and what by particular, localised patterns of social interaction – the small-scale version?

To better understand the nature of these two different versions of community of practice, we first need to understand Lave and Wenger’s overall view of learning. They describe it in this way:

‘As an aspect of social practice, learning involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to specific activities, but also a relation to social communities. … Learning only partly – and often incidentally – implies becoming able to be involved in new activities, to perform new tasks and functions, to master new understandings. Activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning. These systems of relations arise out of and are reproduced and developed within social communities, which are part of systems of relations among persons. … [Learning] is itself an evolving form of membership.’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p53)

Thus they claim that it is membership and social relations that underpin practice and learning, and it is through social relations that the activities of learning can be understood.

From this point of view, their claim that a community of practice is an intrinsic condition for learning has greater significance than any definition of what a community is. Indeed, it may be for this reason that Lave and Wenger’s (1991) definition appears so late in the book. From this wider perspective, the argument is that we need to belong to learn, and whatever it is that we belong to, can be called a community of practice. Looked at this way, the notion of community of practice resembles Bourdieu’s concept of ‘field’ (see below). At this point, we would make
only two observations. Firstly, when looked at in this way, ‘communities of practice’ can be enormously varied. The research task is not to see whether they exist or not, but to identify their characteristics in relation to learning. Not being part of a close-knit community, with mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire of actions (Wenger, 1998), simply defines a different type of membership and a different type of community. There is strength in the lack of a precise definition, or of clear identifiable boundaries. From this perspective, for example, schoolteachers can be seen to belong to several overlapping communities of practice – the teaching profession, the school where they work, the community of fellow specialists in a particular subject, etc. Alternatively, and more in tune with Bourdieu’s writings, the community of practice or ‘field’ of schoolteacher learning includes all these overlapping levels of interaction.

Secondly, for Bourdieu, all human existence relates to the fields that people occupy. It is inconceivable to think of a person as not in a field. To claim that would be to claim that their existence had no social dimension – that they had no position in the social world, no dispositions towards it, and no social interactions with others. Though the term community of practice, and the exemplars used, impede this meaning within Lave and Wenger’s work, it arguably stays truest to their underlying principles, and is consistent with their claim that membership is an essential condition for learning. It further reinforces the view that learning is ubiquitous in participatory activity.

However, there may be difficulties if the term ‘community of practice’ is used mainly or only in this wider sense. This is because, in certain situations, the tighter community of practice implied by the examples in the original book does exist, and our school departments were examples. Also, the term ‘community’ in its more general English usage implies spatial and social closeness and cohesion. So how valuable is this tighter meaning for the term community of practice?

This is a practical, pragmatic, even an empirical question. Where such tight-knit communities exist, the narrower focus of Lave and Wenger’s examples, and the tighter definition offered by Wenger (1998) may retain value. For example, in our study of schoolteacher learning, it was very helpful to see the subject departments as small communities of practice. Our research confirmed that in all four departments, the learning of experienced teachers, as well as that of newcomers, was centrally concerned with social relations and belonging, within those departments. These community interrelations were the most effective way of explaining significant differences between the learning in each department, which could not be reduced either to the level of individual learners, nor to the level of the school as an organization, or to teaching in English secondary school, more generally. It is differences between the social relations of the historians, musicians, artists and Information Technologists that underpin levels and types of collaboration and collaborative learning, that lay at the root of these differences. This included the synergy between members’ dispositions in art, a partly uncomfortable equilibrium between them in history. In a similar way, the relative insularity of teacher groups in art and music distinguished them from the IT teachers, who mixed more effectively with other teachers in the school where they worked, and were more likely to learn with and from teachers from those other departments (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2004).

Thus, it was useful to apply this tighter form of community of practice to the small coherent subject departments in our study. It provided a valuable intermediate level of analysis, between the broader occupational and organisational context and the dispositions of individual workers. However, even when applying this tighter form, it is important to focus on the actual participatory practices and relationships that are observed, rather than on the sort of detailed reified list of 14 criteria to determine whether or not a true community of practice has been formed, that Wenger (1998, p125-6) offers. Both the departmental scale and the national scale have explanatory value for understanding teacher learning, and no account is complete without incorporating both (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2003).
Consequently, to retain many of the most valuable insights in Lave and Wenger’s (1991) work, we have to retain both meanings of the term ‘community of practice’. To retain only the narrower meaning would relegate their work to certain specific conditions of closeness, when it can be immensely insightful in other contexts too. But to jettison the narrower meaning would be to risk overlooking the significance of such tight working communities, where they do exist. One way of retaining both meanings is to modify our terminology. In subsequent writing, including that of Wenger (1998, Wenger et al, 2002), it is the narrower meaning of community that tends to predominate. This suggests the following terminology: *Situated learning*, or *learning as social participation*, are better terms to capture the underlying essence of Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theoretical approach, than are communities of practice. *The field of practice*, or *learning field*, following Bourdieu, may be better terms than community of practice to represent the view that learning is ubiquitously social. *Community of practice* may be better preserved for the narrower, more cohesive types of social relations that characterise Lave and Wenger’s examples. Such a community of practice implies a smaller scale of focus than ‘field’, and can be useful where such narrower communities can be identified. The relevance of this scale of examination is revealed in Boud and Middleton’s (2003) analysis of four different groups of learners, within the same large organisation. They found that the social interactions between workers in the same work group was a significant form of informal learning in all groups, but that the detailed workings of those interactions were different in each group.

**Using Bourdieu to further develop Lave & Wenger’s approach.**

In taking this dual view of communities of practice forward, in retaining both meanings whilst establishing a distinction between them, and in going on to address some of the major challenges for workplace learning research and theorising identified at the start of this paper, some of the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu can be of great value. He never addressed learning explicitly, but some of the deep-rooted similarities between his position and that of Lave and Wenger make it relatively easy to link the two modes of analysis.

We start with the concept of ‘field’, which closely resembles the wider and less precise view of communities of practice in Lave and Wenger’s work. Bourdieu eschews a precise definition of field, and is unconcerned with identifying precise boundaries. Where such boundaries exist, they can only be located in relation to particular examples and circumstances, not through generalised criteria. In any event, fields often overlap. In particular, any specific field will always interrelate with what he terms the ‘field of power’ – the more macro structures and processes of inequality in society.

Instead of a definition, Bourdieu uses two metaphors to describe what a field is (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). The first is that of a market, and the second a game. Because of the recent domination of certain types of market views within policies towards vocational education and workplace learning, the former metaphor carries baggage, for example associated with human capital theory, that we wish to avoid. Consequently, we concentrate here on the metaphor of a game. Bourdieu uses this metaphor to emphasise some key characteristics of a field. Thus, like a game, a field is in flux, not some static set of structural relations. Like a game, players in the field are striving to do well – both in their own terms, but also within the established rules of the game. He describes this as striving for distinction (Bourdieu, 1984), though this can take many different forms. In our schoolteacher’s study, at least one of the teachers was striving for a comfortable survival – to preserve enough space to play the game as he wanted. Others were more conventionally ambitious. As both market and game metaphors make clear, fields are conflictual as well as consensual, and we would argue that this insight applies to workplace
learning at all levels of operation, in ways that Lave and Wenger’s actual examples tend to overlook.

Like a game, a field has rules, some of which are explicit – reified procedures, in Wenger’s (1998) terms. Thus, Rainbird et al. (2004) point out that in all workplaces, the employment relationship is governed by such rules. In our schoolteachers’ study, this could be seen in the ways in which the job was codified through national policy and pay structures, as well as through official school procedures and processes. However, unlike many formal games, the rules of a field are also tacit and uncodified. They are determined in part by the players of the game, who construct the processes and procedures of the field through their participation in it. Thus, the practices in the history department were partly constructed through an uneasy equilibrium between the desire of the head of department for greater collaborative working and learning, the resistance of a senior departmental member who wanted to preserve his own space, and the desire of a newly appointed teacher to retreat to her own thoughts and her own classroom, rather than engage more closely with the others.

As in a more literal game, the players are not equal. Linking back to the market metaphor, Bourdieu describes the roots of some of these differences and inequalities in two places. Firstly, people are unequally positioned in the field. Thus, for example, as Engestrom’s (1999, 2001, 2004) work makes clear, hierarchical divisions of labour in work are of fundamental importance in understanding workplace learning. The differing positions of say, cleaners, office workers, schoolteachers and headteachers, mean that they play the game of working and learning in schools very differently. Secondly, such differences and inequalities relate to the levels and types of capital that players possess – which are, in turn, reciprocally related to the positions that they occupy. Bourdieu identifies three types, but is relatively unconcerned about the distinctions between them, seeing all as overlapping, and also mutually exchangeable. Economic capital is the most straightforward, and equates with the financial resources different players possess. In our study of teachers, whilst we focussed only within our sample schools, economic capital did not seem especially significant in understanding their learning, probably because all our sample were relatively well paid, and the differences in pay between them were relatively slight. However, when we compared teachers’ learning with that of other workers, such as cleaners and care assistants, economic capital became much more significant in explaining those differences and revealing its significance for both groups. Superficially, teachers were more able to pay for courses at the local university, whilst many cleaners and care workers were not. More significantly, economic disparities lay at the roots of social class differences, as Marx so clearly pointed out.

Social capital, for Bourdieu, roughly equates to whom you know and who knows you. It is a way of expressing the advantages and disadvantages that come from social relations, including sponsorship or its opposite – marginalisation or even exclusion. In one sense, Lave and Wenger’s original focus on legitimate participation can be seen in relation to social capital. Who is perceived as legitimately belonging? This is not just a matter of being officially given the job. Some of the problems women face in male dominated workplaces can be partly understood as their lack of some key elements of social capital necessary in such contexts – they do not belong to the old boys club of mangers or its working class equivalent, and rather than sponsorship from dominant members, they often face forms of discrimination and even exclusion. Similarly, a middle aged, middle class academic like Phil Hodkinson, would lack the social capital to fit in to a working class context, such as a coal mine, factory shop floor, or the predominantly female world of nursery nursing.

The third, and arguably for Bourdieu most important, form of capital is cultural capital. This roughly equates to understanding how the game is played. People play such games largely within what Giddens (1991) terms ‘practical consciousness’. That is, people often possess
'pre-perceptive anticipations, a sort of practical induction [to the future] based upon previous experience … [anticipations that] are the fact of the habitus as a feel for the game. Having the feel for the game is having the game under the skin; it is to master, in a practical way the future of the game; it is to have a sense of history of the game.’ (Bourdieu, 1998, p80).

The links with workplace learning operate on two levels. Firstly, this is the end product of legitimate peripheral participation – the achievement of full membership. Secondly, it is the natural state of much of the learning of experienced workers, partly as they make what Beckett and Hager (2002) term embodied judgements that are anticipatory as well as drawing upon previous experiences, and partly as they learn through meeting new and unexpected challenges, that disrupt established ways of proceeding, even for experts (Engestrom, 2004).

Because capital is unequally distributed, and also because people occupy differing and unequal positions within the field, this sort of game does not possess a ‘level playing field’. Put simply, those with superior positions and more capital not only have advantages in playing the game, or learning. They also have more influence on the rules that determine the nature of success, and what counts as capital or as successful learning. Though these differences can be thought of at an individual level, Bourdieu seldom does that. He is more concerned with broader social and cultural differences. Thus, in relation to workplace learning, ‘players’ could include governments, company management collectively, or Trades Unions.

It should always be remembered that capital only has value in relation to specific fields. That is, like all other factors contributing to workplace learning, it is relational. The only sense in which capital is more universal in nature, lies in its links with the wider field of power, which, as has already been explained, impinges on all other fields. Thus, issues such as social class, gender or ethnic inequalities are deep-seated across many if not all fields in contemporary British and no doubt Australian society. If we see workplace learning in this way, it is relatively easy to build in to the wider meaning of communities of practice, those key issues of unequal power relations and inequalities in learning, within and beyond the workplace, that Lave and Wenger (1991) acknowledge as important, but do not directly address. Thus, the lack of status, low pay and absence of many learning opportunities for office cleaners, is closely related to their working class and often, but not always, predominantly female positions and identities (Rainbird et al., 2004).

An additional key part of a Bourdieuan understanding of field, directly brings in the individual worker/learner. Heather Hodkinson will say more about this in her paper, but a little needs to be said here, to complete the picture. For Bourdieu, people are always positioned. Thus, social class, gender, ethnicity, age, educational attainment, work role etc., locate a person, throughout their lives. He uses the concept of habitus to capture a key element of this, which is difficult to explain, but centrally important. In ways that parallel Lave and Wenger’s claims about learning, Bourdieu argues that it is a mistake to see individuals as somehow located in a social structure that is external to them. Rather, they are part of that structure, and the structure is part of them. The habitus, then, is the expression of social structure through the person. He describes habitus as a battery of dispositions that orientate our actions. These dispositions are often tacit, in the sense that we are largely unaware of them. They are rooted in our past and present positions, and can be difficult to change. However, they are neither deterministic, not set in stone. Throughout our life, dispositions can and sometimes do change, in ways that range from the relatively superficial, to something much more fundamental. However, even if they change radically, we never completely step outside our previous habitus. There is no tabula rasa - no clean start.
Heather will argue that dispositions are influential not only in terms of what and how we learn, but also in relation to the ways in which we contribute to the construction of the learning field – though her focus will be mainly concerned with the narrower version of a community of practice. It is in the small-scale, localised communities, where they exist, that individual influences, through position, dispositions (habitus) and capital, can most easily be traced. It is through this notion of dispositions, that a social view of the individual can be connected into a social view of learning, thus at least partly tackling a major challenge for the literature.

To recap and summarise some of this, it is possible to identify at least three completely integrated and interrelated, but also partially distinct, levels of workplace learning, when seen as participation/construction. The first is the learning field, drawing upon both Bourdieu and Lave and Wenger’s wider version of community of practice. This is universal in the sense that all learning takes place in one or more fields. The nature of those fields, their size, boundaries and overlaps, are matters for determination in relation to specific learning situations. That determination is partly empirical, but also an issue of interpretation by the researcher. Thus, in our study of schoolteachers’ learning, it probably made most sense to define the learning field as English secondary schooling, because of the combination of shared cultural traditions, and strongly imposed government driven policies, systems and procedures. However, with a different research focus, we could have defined the main field in a more restrictive manner, for example focussing on all history teachers.

Secondly, there is the narrower form of community of practice, broadly as defined by Wenger (1998). Whether such communities exist or not is itself a question of empirical determination and interpretative judgement. It made sense for us to see the subject departments as this sort of community of practice, but whilst this form of organisation is common in English secondary schools, it may not be in other schooling systems. As part of our research network, Peter Senker did some work on the learning of care workers who supported people who were providing care in their own homes. Though the jobs they were doing had a strong family resemblance, it made little sense to think of them as a community. This is because each of them worked predominantly alone, and their main social contacts were with particular clients whom they worked with. On the other hand, Phil Hodkinson (2004) has argued that many educational researchers work in communities of practice, even though they may be geographically separated. Thus, for example, it may be valuable to think of a community of practice of those who examine workplace learning primarily through activity theory, or, to take a very different type of example, those who see themselves as predominantly philosophers of education. Of course, many researchers belong to more than one of these overlapping communities, and others resolutely carve out a more individualistic position. Thus, however identified, these narrower communities of practice are not universal. They may be absent or present, depending upon particular situations. Even at this more restrictive level, the relational workings of rules, positions, capital and dispositions can still usefully be applied, in order to make sense of the ways in which the workings of such communities contribute to workplace learning (or not).

Finally, there is the level of the individual worker/learner. This is also universal, as all people have an individual existence. However, we would argue that it is important always to see the individual as inherently social in its nature. Thus, a person is part of communities of practice (if relevant) and of learning fields which are also part of them, and of whom they are.

At all three levels, we need to simultaneously hold onto social structures, social relations, and individual and/or group/organisational agency. Using Bourdieu to extend Lave and Wenger’s work helps to do that. Furthermore, the nature of these levels, relationships between them, the nature of structure, social relations and agency and the relationships between them, vary from specific location to specific location. Thus, as Lave (1996, p161-162) herself argues:
‘There are enormous differences in what and how learners come to shape (or be shaped into) their identities with respect to different practices…Researchers would have to explore each practice to understand what is being learned, and how’.

**Meeting the Challenges to Understanding Workplace Learning**

So how does this reworking and extension of Lave and Wenger’s thinking, contribute towards meeting the six challenges with which we opened the paper? The answer varies from challenge to challenge.

1). *To incorporate wider issues of social and economic inequalities beyond the actual site of learning, fully into the analysis of learning.*

This is probably the single greatest benefit from taking the approach advocated here. As I have already shown, focussing on the idea of a learning field, as an elaboration of Lave and Wenger’s broader and more universal version of community of practice, makes it relatively straightforward to draw in matter of wider social structures and processes. Of equal importance, the concepts of position and habitus help show that social inequalities are located within the individual learners, as well as outside them.

2). *To blend what is known about the impact of power differentials in relation to access to learning into our understanding of social learning processes.*

This challenge can be at least partly met through the application of Bourdieu’s concepts and approaches at all three levels just identified. In particular, the combination of position, disposition and capital, in the context of either a broader learning field or more narrowly focussed community of practice, where competition and conflict are as likely as synergy and cooperation, gives a mechanism to do this.

3). *Integrating individual learners into social theorising about learning.*

In ways which Heather will make clearer in her presentation, the focus in Lave and Wenger on social participation, belonging and what they term identity, already lends itself to the incorporation of social individuals into the analysis. Bourdieu’s thinking helps here too, through his account of the relationships between disposition, position, capital and field. In our view, whilst Engestrom’s version of activity theory is pretty good at dealing with problem 2, his central focus on activities rather than on social relations makes the integration of individuals more difficult to achieve than in the theoretical frame suggested here.

4). *Replacing and moving beyond the common but mistaken assumption that informal and formal learning are distinctly different types of learning, where the former is often assumed to be inherently superior to the latter.*

There is more work to be done in meeting this challenge, but we would argue that the framework advanced above facilitates this. In essence, if we examine learning at work (including on and off the job) in a holistic and relational manner, it should not be difficult to examine what Colley et al (2003) term attributes of formality and informality in learning, in an integrated way. This approach can accommodate Billett’s (2002, 2004) argument that workplace learning is inherently structured, without losing the valuable insights found much work that describes some workplace learning as informal (eg Beckett and Hager, 2002). It is also consistent with research by Solomon et al (2003) showing that much learning took place in what they term hybrid spaces, that were neither on or off the job, like cafeterias, and in people’s cars.
5). Adequately addressing the fact that workplace learning processes can be very effective in promoting poor or unethical practice.

Dealing with this challenge partly depends upon meeting challenge 4, but is in some ways a more difficult problem to overcome. The essence is to deal with the outcomes of learning in the workplace or college, without slipping back in to outworn and increasingly untenable acquisition views of learning (Hager, in press). Whilst parts of Lave and Wenger’s critique of schooling is unhelpful in this process, their approach towards workplace learning, as extended above, shows a clear way forward, for the outcomes of workplace learning are to be found either in the nature of social practices and cultural values in the workplace (learning field and community of practice) and in the dispositions and identities of workers. Such outcomes can take the form of either changes (to person or workplace culture and practices) or reinforcements of existing values, dispositions or practices. When outcomes are seen in this way, it is possible to make judgements (hot or cold!) about their practical and moral worth. As Lave and Wenger would themselves presumably argue, in doing so, we are not making judgements about learning outcomes as a reified, isolated commodity. Rather, we are making judgements about the culture and practices of the workplace itself, of the society of which it is part, and of the individuals who inhabit and participate in it. One brief example to illustrate this point follows in the next section.

6). Examining off-the -job learning/training from a social/participatory perspective.

Phil is currently taking this line of thinking forward, in an on-going project examining learning in English Further Education (FE) colleges (roughly the equivalent of TAFE), from a cultural perspective. Called the Transforming Learning Cultures in FE project, this is a four -year study of 16 contrasting learning sites, four in each of four different colleges (Hodkinson and James, In Press). The research explicitly set out to explore the cultural dimensions of college learning, using Bourdieu as a theoretical starting point. We are currently trialing an instrument for analysing the nature of the learning cultures in each site. As well as Bourdieu, some of Lave and Wenger’s foundational ideas underpin the construction of this instrument. One key concern of this work is to understand college learning as cultural, relational, and through a variety of levels. We have not thus far directly examined the sites as communities of practice, but superficial analysis suggests that the tighter definition works better for some sites than for others.

When combined with more explicitly work-based studies, we will be able to explore the similarities and differences of workplace and college learning. This is partly because we are using similar conceptual tools in both arenas, and partly because some of our FE sites entail both workplace and college learning. This has already resulted in the identification of what we term vocational habitus – the ways in which deeply embedded cultural values and dispositions within an occupational area, strongly influence college-based learning in relation to that occupation (Colley et al, in press). This can lead to either synergy or tensions. Though, at one level, synergy seems to be more effective, there is a heavy price to pay. In sites where the synergy between vocational habitus and course teaching is high, there is no space to challenge or critique problematic practices or values within that occupation. One example of this is the way in which a nursery-nursing course reinforces sexist values, and imposes burdens of emotional labour uncritically upon the students entering the career (see point 5, above). On the other hand, where the vocational habitus and college teaching are in tension, there can be well known problems for college provision, as students routinely question its value and relevance to their work placement practices.

For Phil Hodkinson, all this work is leading to a new paper, not yet very far advanced. His argument develops from an important insight by Billett (2002, 57):

‘Workplaces and educational institutions merely represent different instances of social practices in which learning occurs through participation. Learning in both kinds of social
practice can be understood through a consideration of their respective participatory practices. Therefore, to distinguish between the two … [so that] one is formalised and the other informal … is not helpful.’

That is, theoretically, there may be little substantial difference between workplace and educational learning. There are highly significant differences, but these can be explained largely in terms of the specific details of field, individual and community of practice.
REFERENCES


