

# Situated Learning as Legitimate Peripheral Participation

ZHENG Chunxian

Zhejiang University of Science and Technology, Hangzhou, China

The theory of situated learning as legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) is widely applied in the educational field. But understandings of it are diversified so that quite a lot of these understandings in literature are not in conform to the spirit of the theory. Thus, drawing on literature review, this paper attempts to explicate the theory from three aspects: practical and philosophical base, the central ideas of the theory, and its difference from the cognitive learning theory, aiming to contribute to an easier understanding of it by readers and researchers.

*Keywords:* situated learning, legitimate peripheral participation, understanding

## Introduction

The concept of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) as an analytic way of situated learning originates from Lave and Wenger's (1991) social learning theory, which is based on the collectivist or societal perspective of Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory. Different from the traditional cognitive definition of learning, this perspective defines learning as "an interplay between the social competence and the personal experience in a social learning system" (Wenger, 2000, p. 227). In other words, learning is perceived as a changing participation in the social practice of a community of practice (CoP), a progress along trajectories of changing engagement in practices, "changes that lead from peripheral to fuller participation and growth of identity" (Young & Miller, 2004, p. 519), in Lave and Wenger's (1991) term, "development from newcomer to old-timer" (p. 53) in a CoP.

Since the publication of their monograph, the theory witnesses wide application, and there is a large body of research around it. According to Smith, Hayes, and Shea (2017), however, of these researches, a lot of them draw the theory as a methodology rather than the epistemology (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger-Trayner, 2016). According to the study of Smith et al. (2017) on the application of CoP theory into online and blended learning from year 2000-2014, only three articles are in deeply conform to the spirit of Lave and Wenger's theory. One of the reasons may arise from the great difference of this learning theory from the traditional theories and the consequent difficulty of understanding of it. Hence, the production of this paper as an introductory explication of the core constructs "LPP", aiming to help people understand it.

## Practical and Philosophical Base of the Theory

The theory of situated learning as a matter of LPP is based on Lave and Wenger's (1991) research on craft apprenticeship of five cases: midwives, tailors, quartermasters, butchers, and nondrinking alcoholics. In their anthropological observation of these apprenticeship cases, they find the "central defining characteristic" (p. 29)

---

ZHENG Chunxian, associate professor, School of Foreign Languages, Zhejiang University of Science and Technology, Hangzhou, China.

of the apprentices' learning and development processes, which they conceptualized as legitimate peripheral participation (LPP). Here, legitimacy means gaining access to the resources of a CoP, the social world, and peripherality, "to a limited degree and with limited responsibility for the ultimate product" (p. 14) in practice. And the term "participation" suggests the location of learning is in the interpersonal interaction of the social world, which is in contrast to the term "acquisition" of the traditional learning theory, assumed to take place in the human brain, the inner world.

Under this perspective, "learning is viewed as a situated activity" (p. 29) characteristic of LPP. This means "learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the socio-cultural practices of a community" (p. 29). LPP is a common way for apprentice to developmental experience, it is also a way for researchers "to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts and communities of knowledge and practice" (p. 29). It "concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a CoP" (p. 29), where "a person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a socio-cultural practice" (p. 29). And this socio-cultural process "subsumes the learning of knowledgeable skills" (p. 29). Simply speaking, the notion of LPP provides a way to describe the relationship of participants. It concerns how a newcomer gets access to the resources of CoPs and the learner, as an actor and agent, is intentional when drawing on these resources selectively to solve problems in practice. To a novice, the meaning of learning is negotiated in the process of his/her evolving into a full participant in a socio-cultural practice, where what a learner learn is activities as well as knowledgeable skills.

The philosophical base of Lave and Wenger's situated learning theory is Marxism (p. 38) in that it inherits Marxist definition of such concepts as abstract and concrete, general and particular, etc. In the Marxist social practice theory, the relation of abstract and concrete, general and particular, theory about the world and the world itself is not considered as dualist oppositions, but as dualist identification. Specifically, abstract and concrete, general and particular, theory about the world and the world itself are not considered as "the two poles of interest" (p. 38), but as "points of departure for starting to explore and produce an understanding of multiply determined, diversely unified—that is, complexly concrete—historical processes, of which, particularities are the result" (p. 38). In other words, situated learning theory by Lave and Wenger as a social learning theory differs from the traditional cognitive learning theory in that the latter "assumes theory to be general and abstract, the world, concrete and particular" (p. 38), while the former "is not intended as abstraction, but as an attempt to explore the concrete relations of LPP" (p. 39). As Lave and Wenger (1991) stated, such terms as abstract and concrete, general and particular, etc. "take on different relations with each other and different meanings" (p. 38) in Marxist historical tradition. "They do so as part of a general method of social analysis" (p. 38), which "does not deny that there is a concrete world, ordinarily perceived as some collection of particularities" (p. 38). What the theorists of Marxism do is "trying to recapture those relations in an analytic way that turns the apparently 'natural' categories and forms of social life into challenges to their understanding of how they are historically and culturally produced and reproduced" (p. 38). The goal of it, "in Marx's memorable phrase, is to ascend from both the particular and the abstract to the concrete" (p. 38). As such, situated learning theory as LPP is contextualized research, rather than decontextualized one.

### **The Central Idea of the Theory**

Situated learning theory holds that “learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind” (p. 15). This means that learning “is mediated by the differences of perspective among the co-participants. It is the community, or at least those participating the learning context, who learn under this definition” (p. 15). That is to say, learning is “distributed among co-participants, not a one-person act” (p. 15). Every participant is learning in the interaction or engagement. What is different is that each one may learn something different, and their transformation varies too in the process of practice, where the novice may be “the one transformed most dramatically by increasing participation” (p. 15) in his/her process of development from a newcomer to a master through LPP. In this sense, it is known as the collectivist perspective of learning/the collectivist learning theory.

In this perspective, learning is co-construction by participants of the situational context for action of solutions to problems, wherein different practitioners take different roles and responsibilities in activities, and participate to different extent, embodied in the multiple relations among them, such as novice-expert, dominant-dominant, novice-novice, etc., as is the description of Zheng (2012) and Zheng and Huang (2017). And the relationship between the participants is constantly changing in the interactive process of practice, for every one of the practitioners can be an apprentice or expert at a particular moment. In practice, the practitioners’ action is not just the effect of the immediate context; it is also the effect of the macro socio-cultural forces, such as policies, regulation, etc. This is similar to the construct of “interdiscursivity” by Bhatia (2012) and Bhatia and Salmani Nodoushan (2015) in his critical genre analysis theory about writing, in which writers not just attend to the linguistic context, but also the social context of the authentic readers of the given genre.

The result of LPP for the novice learners is their whole person development, which means they become a full participant as a person-in-practice of the social world. In Lave and Wenger’s (1991) words, they become “a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by the complicated systems of relations” (p. 53). In this sense, learning involves the construction of identities, and whole person development entails becoming an old-timer. As such, there are great difference of learning as LPP from learning as internalization, as is explicated in the subsequent section.

### **Difference of Learning as LPP From Learning as Internalization**

As has been mentioned previously, learning as LPP is based on social practice of apprenticeship, different from learning as internalization. As a social learning theory, it concerns the socialness of interactive learning rather than the cerebral operation of cognitive learning. The differences between the two types of theories are represented in six aspects, as displayed in Table 1.

By saying learning as LPP takes a relational view of learning instead of a cognitive view, it means focusing on “the relationship between learning and social situations in which it occurs” (p. 14) rather than how the head acquires propositional knowledge. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), such a learning is situated in “certain forms of social co-participation” (p. 14). Therefore, what interests them is “what kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place” (p. 14) rather than “what kinds of cognitive processes and conceptual structure are involved” (p. 14) in the head of an individual.

Table 1

|  | Situated learning as LPP                                | Intellectualist learning theory                  |
|--|---|--|
| Philosophical base                     | Humanism, Marxism                                       | Scientism, reductionism                          |
| Concept metaphor                       | Participation framework                                 | Acquisition framework                            |
| View of learning                       | A relational view                                       | A cognitive view                                 |
| Knowledge character                    | Situated, open-ended                                    | Discrete and abstract                            |
| Focus of learning                      | The whole person  | The individual mind                              |
| Relation between learning and practice | Learning is taken to be an integral aspect of practice. | Practice is subsumed with processes of learning. |

And according to Lave and Wenger (1991), in LPP learning, what a learner's learning is not the discrete and abstract knowledge and skills but the situated knowledge and performing skills by actually engaging in the process. Such skills are highly interactive and productive, acquired in a way of LPP in the actual practice of a relative expert.

Situated learning theory shift the focus of learning from the individual mind to the whole person, to the community, to the wider process, to the participation framework. That is, it "concerns the whole person acting in the world" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 49) and focuses attention on how learning goes on as "an evolving, continuously renewed set of relations among persons, their actions, and the world" (p. 50). This is something different from the acquisition framework, which holds that "it is the individual mind that acquires mastery over processes of reasoning and description, by internalizing and manipulating structures" (p. 15).

And the notion of learning as LPP displays its "break with the dualisms that have kept persons reduced to their minds, mental processes to instrumental rationalism and learning to the acquisition of knowledge" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 50). It insists on "the historical nature of motivation, desire, and the very relations by which social and culturally mediated experience is available to persons-in-practice" (p. 50), holding a broad view of human agency and emphasizing "the integration in practice of agent, world, and activity" (p. 50). In other words, it rejects the abstraction and generalization of learning in a scientific, reductionist and decontextualized way; instead, it adopts a humanistic, Marxist, contextualized way to deal with learning—to study the concrete moment-by-moment experience of learning in a specific social world, in which learning is viewed as an inherent part of social practice, as contrast with the theory of learning as internalization, which assumes that practice is part of learning, just as Lave and Wenger (1991) pointed out,

There is significant contrast between a theory of learning in which practice (in a narrow, replicative sense) is subsumed/included with processes of learning and one in which learning is taken to be an integral aspect of practice (in a historical, generative sense). (p. 34)

In addition, Lave and Wenger (1991) also rejected the reduction of the end point of centripetal participation in a CoP to a uniform or univocal center or to a linear notion of skill acquisition. They point out that "there is no single core or center" (p. 36) in a CoP and no place designated as the peripherality. They "have chosen to call that to which peripheral participation leads, *full participation*" (p. 37), in order to "do justice to the diversity of relations involved in varying forms of community membership" (p. 37). In other words, the end point of centripetal participation in a CoP is full participation, which is both in contrast and in relation to peripheral participation in that peripheral participation leads to full participation. In this sense, full participation is a construct of holistic nature.

## Conclusion

As a theory of social practice, situated learning as LPP differs from the traditional learning theory in that it “emphasizes the relational interdependency of agent and world, activity, meaning, cognition, learning, and knowing” (p. 50). It “emphasizes the socially negotiated character of meaning and the interested, concerned character of the thought and action of person-in-activity” (p. 50), for the meaning here refers to the communicative meaning in the local social context, and the thought and action is the result of the response to this immediate social context. Learning, thinking, and knowing arise from “the socially and culturally structured world” (p. 51). It integrates the personal, interpersonal, and community development through the notion of “whole person participation” (p. 53), involving not just the learners’ brains, but also their bodies and senses, aiming at becoming a different person by constructing relations with other practitioners in a CoP in their involvement in one or another activity.

## References

- Bhatia, V. K. (2012). Critical reflections on genre analysis. *Iberica*, 24, 17-28.
- Bhatia, V. K., & Salmani Nodoushan, M. A. (2015). Genre analysis: The state of the art. *International Journal of Language Studies*, 9(2), 121-130.
- Farnsworth, V., Kleanthous, I., & Wenger-Trayner, E. (2016). Communities of practice as a social theory of learning: A conversation with Etienne Wenger. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 64(2), 139-160.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.
- Smith, S. U., Hayes, S., & Shea, P. (2017). A critical review of the use of Wenger’s community of practice (CoP) theoretical framework in online and blended learning research, 2000-2014. *Online Learning*, 21(1), 209-237.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in society. In M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, and E. Souber-man (Eds.), *The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wenger, E. (2000). Communities of practice and social learning systems. *Organization*, 7(2), 225-246.
- Young, R. F., & Miller, E. R. (2004). Learning as changing participation: Discourse roles in ESL writing conferences. *The Modern Language Journal*, 88(4), 519-535.
- Zheng, C. (2012). Understanding the learning process of peer feedback activity: An ethnographic study of exploratory practice. *Language Teaching Research*, 16(1), 109-126.
- Zheng, C. X., & Huang, X. Y. (2017). Learning as changing identity investment in social practice, discourse analysis of a peer feedback activity. *Advances in Applied Sociology*, 7(2), 64-82.