Book Review

Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner (2020). *Learning to Make a Difference. Value Creation in Social Learning Spaces*, Cambridge University Press, ix + 279 pages[1]

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In their work, in their leisure time – yes, indeed in all walks of life – people interact with one another, have new experiences, come to know new things, and learn new things about their environment and the world they inhabit. But how? Philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, cognitive scientists, and many more have theorized this fundamental question and developed theories of learning. Thirty years ago, anthropology professor Jean Lave and cognitive scientist Etienne Wenger developed a social theory of learning that conceptualize learning as a process of situated cognition – legitimate peripheral participation – in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991). This theory – and specifically the concept of communities of practice (CoP) that Etienne Wenger later explored in more detail (Wenger 1998) – have become an influential theoretical and analytical inspiration for researchers in education, organization studies, sociology, social-psychology, and the entire range of disciplines that are preoccupied with the study of social life and working life. The concept has also been of inspiration for managers and educators who wants to enhance learning in organizations. The theory envisions learning as a social process, where neophytes and established practitioners who share similar challenges interact with one another on a regular basis, negotiate meanings within regimes of competence, and align and coordinate their actions to accomplish their objectives. The learning process is perceived as a process where practitioners' identities are slowly transformed as they engage the practices of a social community. The leitmotif of the theory is drawn from traditional work-initiation and training. Apprenticeship – the establishment of a relationship between the neophyte and the experienced practitioners – is installed as the vehicle of the learning process.

Now, 30 years after the introduction of the theory, one of its proponents and founders, Etienne Wenger-Trayner, together with his spouse Beverly Wenger-Trayner, propose a new – and in their view – more encompassing social learning theory. Working independently as social learning theorists, educators, and consultants, they have published what is to be the first volume in a series of books that intend to update the original social learning theory of CoP. This first volume contains the foundational outline of their new theory of social learning and more practical considerations about how the theoretical

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[1] You can find this text and its DOI at https://tidsskrift.dk/njwls/index.
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framework can be put to use in order to create value for practitioners in education and working life. The intended audience of the book is thus both academic researchers preoccupied with theorizing learning, and practitioners in education and management. Thus, the first 70 pages of the book outline the new theoretical framework, and to some extent engage with the scholarly literature on learning theory, while the remainder of the book exemplify and operationalize the framework with cases and reflections on the practical implications of the framework.

The central idea of the book is that learning should be considered as a much more encompassing phenomenon than that portrayed in the original CoP theory. Although learning must still be considered as an effect of participation and engagement in social practice, and as a result of people's continuous efforts to create meaning and construct their identities as they interact with their environments, it is too restrictive to theorize learning along the structures of CoPs. Much learning takes place in social spaces between, outside, and beyond CoPs. Learning, the authors argue, need not be conditional on people's identification with a shared domain and a commitment to a specific practice and regime of competence. CoP's signify a very special type of structure for social learning that is nested in broader and more pervasive structures. The new theory sets out to discern these structures in order that we will also be able to explain how learning unfolds in other social spaces such as sporadic conversations between strangers, network activities, online spaces, dancing, conference attendance, classroom instruction, and many more.

The structural features that enable learning in all these very diverse social spaces are, according to the new social learning theory by Wenger-Trayners that (1) the learners care to make a difference, (2) the learners are engaging uncertainty, and (3) the learners are paying attention.

It is an essential feature of learning processes, the Wenger-Trayners argue, that the learners are driven my aspirations and pursuits that they care about. Learning thus presupposes an affective directedness toward making a difference in relation to the world they inhabit. The exact nature of the difference need not be specified at the outset of the learning process. The intended difference that the learners are eager to make can gradually become clearer in the learning process. The initiation of the learning process is driven by issues that learners identify with and are affectively invested in – even if the objective of the learning process is not clear. In fact, learning is characterized by 'being in tension between caring to make a difference and having a clear path to get there' (p. 21). It is thus also a characteristic of learning that learners are willing to engage uncertainty and suffer the uneasiness that comes along with this unsettlement. Finally, learning is characterized by learners paying attention, that is, by their willingness to actively engage in a 'dance between accepting, taking in, thinking about, resisting, and refusing feedback' (p. 28). Learning can thus also imply unlearning as learners listens to the world, as it starts talking back to them, and it implies an openness that might eventually affect the learners' identities.

These structural features of learning exist along other structural features of social practices and spaces. Learning might occur in formalized educational settings, in unformal and more incidental encounters with other people, in an engaged embodied activity with materials, artifacts, procedures, and practices – and it might or might not be accompanied by the specific structures of CoP. The relationship between the structural features of social learning spaces and the structural features of other social practices and spaces is contingent, according to the theory.

The social ontology implicit in the theory is processual and relational, and it installs value creation as the grounding for social learning: 'Social learning creates value for participants to the extent that they view engaging uncertainty and paying attention as contributing to their ability to make a difference that they care to make' (p. 43). For the Wenger-Trayners, creating value is not a matter of pursuing distant, fixed, or absolute goals that motivate and lends agency to individual learners, rather it is the other way around: the creation of value emerges in the process of engaged negotiation of meaning in social practice, and it lends agency to learners in producing aspirations and capabilities. There is reciprocity between values and agency: 'Agency implies meaningfulness, experiencing that who you are matters and that this makes you exist in your engagement with the world' (p. 61)

The grounding of social learning in processes of valuation enables the Wenger-Trayners to identify four learning modes inherent in social learning spaces: (1) generating value, (2) translating value, (3) framing the creation of value, and (4) evaluating value creation. Social learning spaces can thus enable learning in different ways, and the book gives detailed and insightful examples, drawn from the authors' experiences, of how these learning modes function and interconnect in different social learning spaces.

The Wenger-Trayners' transformation of social learning theory from CoP to value creation in social learning spaces does not only indicate a broadening of the conceptual scope of learning to recognize many more situations as sites for learning, but it also sets a path for deepening our understanding of the basic nature of learning. The CoP theory recognizes that learning is fundamentally a social and normative phenomenon, but only ascribes normativity to the micro-processes of the local communities. The Wenger-Trayners' new social theory of learning understands that normativity transcends local communities, and must be sought in the 'spaces' where valuation takes place – where people in general care about something and wants to achieve and 'do' something (however vague that 'something' might initially be).

The recognition of the role of care, valuation, and doing as the basis of intelligibility, experience, and learning has notably been explored by two 20th-century philosophers, namely John Dewey and Martin Heidegger. The Wenger-Trayners briefly acknowledge their debt to Dewey's discussions of valuation (p. 52), but do unfortunately not discuss it in more detail. Martin Heidegger's groundbreaking characterization of human existence (Dasein) as care in *Being and Time*, is, however, not mentioned at all. This is unfortunate because there seems to be many similarities between the Wenger-Trayners' ideas about the role of care and Heidegger's meticulous exploration of the care-structure that characterize human's (Dasein) being-in-the-world. It is also surprising, as some the Wenger-Trayners' formulations and definitions are almost Heideggerian – for example, when they define agency in learning 'as a crevice between the past and the future that creates an opening to exist as a person who cares to make a difference' (p. 59).

It must be appreciated that the Wenger-Trayners break new ground as they transcend the narrow confines of the CoP conception of learning and explore the subtleties of learning as it unfolds in the diverse 'spaces' in workplaces, schools, online spaces, etc., but it is also a bit disappointing that this exploration only in limited ways mobilize and discuss the scholarly resources already available for theorizing social learning in more detail. The Wenger-Trayners' three-step characterization of social learning as caring to make a difference, engaging uncertainty, and paying attention is on an interesting track

to explore the nature of the social normativity that underpins understanding and learning, but it also seems that practice theory theoreticians have already paved the track and went into much more detail about how practices structure spaces normatively in order that our world become intelligible to us (e.g., Rouse 2015; Schatzki 2002).

Maybe it is unfair of me to articulate this disappointment. The Wenger-Trayners have embarked on a difficult, but appreciable, project in writing a book on learning that addresses both practitioners and scholars. In many ways they succeed, but I guess that practitioners will still be asking for more practical advice in facilitating learning, and scholars will definitely long for more in dept discussions of how the proposed new social theory of learning relates to the vast scholarly traditions in the field. Let us hope that both practitioners and scholars will find more insights in the forthcoming volumes of the announced book series. This first volume of the series has certainly provoked my interest, and I look forward to learn how the Wenger-Trayners will nuance the theory in more detail in future publications.

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