Book Review

Janne Kontio, *Uppsala University, Sweden*

Etienne Wenger-Trayner, Mark Fenton-O'Creevy, Steven Hutchinson (eds): LEARNING IN LANDSCAPES OF PRACTICE: BOUNDARIES, IDENTITY, AND KNOWLEDGEABILITY IN PRACTICE-BASED LEARNING. Routledge, 2015.

This edited volume is one of a number that have recently been published on social learning theories in the wake of Lave & Wenger's iconic work on the concept of *community of practice* (1991). The concept has since been incredibly widely cited and the work remains fundamentally important to our understanding of learning. It has its great share of followers, not least within research on education and perhaps more so within business management, but it has also been attacked with a vast amount of criticism for its lack of perspectives of class, power, different kinds of learning strategies, formal and informal learning (see Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2004). An important criticism towards the earlier work in communities of practice is that it simplified practices and only had the perspective of newcomers' apprentice-like travel into a practice, a criticism which was addressed and developed to a degree in the follow-up book on Community of Practice by Wenger (1998).

In this new volume, Wenger-Trayner (formerly Wenger) et al. present a somewhat elaborated perspective on learning in communities of practice, one that still starts with the assumption that learning is an inherent dimension of everyday life and that it is fundamentally a social process, but is now conceptualised as a trajectory or journey through a landscape of different and complex practices. From this perspective, a living "body of knowledge" can be viewed as a collection of communities of practice. Learning is not merely the acquisition of a curriculum, but a self-transformative journey across this landscape of practices. Achieving a high level of "knowledgeability" is a matter of negotiating a productive identity with respect to the various communities of practice that constitute this landscape.

There are ten chapters, with the introductory and concluding ones co-authored by the editors. The remaining chapters are divided into three sections; the first section covers the theory upon which the latter chapters are building; the second section on a variety of

empirical examples of how the theory has been implemented; and the third one is more zoomed in on a particular form of empirical applications: that of conveners of learning.

The first section, called Theory, gives us the framework for the concept of learning in landscapes of practice. This part of the book lays the grounds for a framework of vocabulary for the following chapters. It is worth noting that the authors of the chapter point out that learning theory is not research per se, it is theory building orienting towards the ability to formulate certain stories about the world. Central for this theory is the notion that knowing is embedded in a practical experience of the world that is interpreted with respect to certain social practices. Still, this is not a theory of learning that will cover all perspectives on learning. The mere 18 pages describing the framework still neglect many crucial aspects of learning; the political dynamics of learning and aspects of power are for instance just briefly mentioned, as if the authors wanted to forestall well-known criticisms but not wanting to dwell deeper into the issues. Then again, this is not economics where new theories replace established ones. Rather, the authors call it a plug & play theory and ask how well does this theory with limited scope connect to other theories of learning such as active network theory or activity theory, which clearly cover grounds where the community of practice-theory leaves gaps?

Looking at the chapters section by section, the first section on theory is the thinnest and probably weakest overall. The community of practice fan-boy wanting to get more weapons in his arsenal to fight towards those attacking the concept will be disappointed. The visualizing concept of a learning as a journey through a landscape of practices was already presented in *Community of Practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1998); it is here barely enhanced with a couple of dimensions, most notable are the steps taken towards a further individualization of the concept taking up the greater part of the chapter: "As a trajectory through a social landscape, learning is not merely the acquisition of knowledge. It is the becoming of a person who inhabits the landscape with an identity whose dynamic construction reflects our trajectory through that landscape." (Wenger-Trayner et. al., 2015, p.19) Learning as becoming however, is by now a well-established theory of learning and has covered a lot of ground in the last decade (see Colley et. al., 2003) and is simply not as ground breaking as the authors present it.

The second section, on empirical stories from the landscapes of practices, opens with the very trendy and hot topic of emotional identity work. With the concept of the different possible landscapes of practises that one might inhabit in which identity work is entailed as

personal trajectories, the emotional processes are examined. Especially a focus on how and to what degree one might be possible to express aspects of identity formed elsewhere in a new context. It is a thought provoking idea that is presented with a few examples of failure taken from different participants moving from one practice into another with an unfamiliar regime of competence. Unfortunately, we are left with not much more than the not-so-surprising conclusion that identity is in the heart of learning.

The following chapter in the section takes off where the former seems to have taken a belly flop. Here the authors, Fenton-O´Creevy et. al., further explore the difficulties of moving from one practice into another by looking at trajectories of participation. We get insights into students' challenges as they get into the dual-focussed practice of courses that seek to integrate learning in both academic and workplace contexts. They face the challenges of straddling the boundaries between the different contexts but are also engaged in transitions across boundaries in the workplace, both between their current and future roles and between different areas of practice. These are well-known challenges for anyone who has been involved in any kind of vocational education and training, and as a reader one is granted with a high degree of recognition throughout this chapter, as we get very colourful descriptions of resilience and tensions towards boundaries as well as support from peers and mentors, as the participants in the examples work their ways through trajectories of learning in the practices they inhabit.

The third chapter in this section is devoted to the nexus of multimembership and explores the identity work involved in managing multimembership in, and accountability to, different communities of practice. The notion of accountability in the process of identity work is a well-established concept within other social research practices and fits convincingly into the theory building here.

The final chapter of the section resumes the contributions in a somewhat benevolent light, even though parts of the volume has more of a flavour of work-in-progress than publishable work. The chapter develops conceptions of congruence and incongruence, and how they often involve particular personal adjustments and negotiations. It does so by looking closely into the work of a research team where tensions are created by bringing people together who identify with and feel accountable to different communities of practice. Anyone who has ever been involved in a research project or any kind of project that brings people together would easily recognize the challenges of aligning participants towards a certain objective. The insights given here about different strategies towards how to manage and

convene multiple identities highlight the challenges and pose important questions about how to enable people to fully identify and learn. When reading along, one gets puzzled why this chapter does not belong to the following last section.

The third and last section and its three chapters before the summary is devoted to the people who work with a systems view of the learning landscape and who work actively to enable learning; namely system convenors. If learning is a journey through a landscape of practice, these people reconfigure these landscapes by forcing together new learning across traditional boundaries.

Next to the earlier chapter on participation trajectories, the chapters in this section, not counting the second to last, stand out as particularly successful, not least because of that they make use of and develop the theoretical framework. This may in part be explained by the fact that the chapters have been written or co-written by Wenger-Trayner. The chapters also stand out as they have a clear joint perspective, seen through the experiences of the conveners and their complex landscapes, making the section a coherent unity.

The first of these three chapters gives insights in the day-to-day work of a convenor, the challenges met and qualifications needed to provide cross-disciplinary thinking in order to solve complex problems. The chapter is well fed with quotes from actual conveners highlighting the items discussed. The challenging work of aligning people, projects and objectives are discussed as well as the different identity traits and trajectories the convenors face, giving the reader an idea of the impossible job that is to push traditional boundaries. The chapter successfully mediates an appreciation for the work done by these conveners to move people beyond comfort zones, though it would benefit from shedding light also into the specifics of the work of a convener; what different types of conveners are there, what kind of strategies used are working and what different tools do they use? The next two chapters give some insights into the exceptional part that the conveners make out in the learning landscape, but far from all. The issues of conveners could easily make for a book in itself, and perhaps it should have, seeing how well the chapters are held together by a string of consistency.

The final two chapters explore the work of conveners by describing two examples; the Dutch government facilitated project Habiforum; and the US Congress initiated project IDEA Partnership. The chapter on Habiforum describes the trust building work that went into convincing different stakeholders (e.g. government agencies, architects and land-owners) to renew and reinvent spatial planning in the Netherlands. The chapter gives a fair description of

the work done by the conveners to get all stakeholders to work towards a joint objective, but in relations to the theoretical framework the chapter is somewhat under-analyzed.

The last empirical chapter on the piece of legislation called the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) puts its focus on the conveners' work in learning partnerships in special education. This chapter sits well in the concepts presented in the section on theory, the complexity of practices and the use of communities of practice as an infrastructure for collaborative learning is utilized. Seeing how the chapter leans heavily on the work done lately by Wenger et. al. on community of practice applied in special education (2007), it is fitting to end the book with a chapter so well integrated to the concepts of learning in landscapes of practice

Even though the well-deserved focus on conveners and their boundary breaking practice is a highlight, there is more to this book. *Learning in Landscapes of Practice* is very rich in voices from multiple landscapes and it will be particularly relevant to people concerned with the design of professional and vocational learning and for people engaged in higher education with work-based ingredients. The developed concept of community of practice is still relevant and can relevantly be applied. It could be argued that Paul Willis already applied it in his iconic work – explaining why boys become mechanics just like their fathers although the fathers complain about their jobs throughout the upbringing of their sons – some fifteen years or so ahead of his time (Willis 1977).

The book's specific foci on identity and identity shaping as crucial parts of learning, though not altogether new, is another of the book's highlights for this reader, it poses serious questions of how we as driving forces in shaping the future of learning can apply new theories of learning to change the practice. What kind of institutions do we wish to create that can meet the students' needs? The needs of knowing how to learn in an increasingly complex world is not about having access to a curriculum, it is about making decisions about who we are becoming. Should we treat every student as a mathematician when we know that only a few will become it? Or should we rather ask ourselves what it takes to make a meaningful visit in the practice of a mathematician?

Finally, in much empirical applied research, it seems that recognizing the possible limitations is justification enough for serious shortcomings. In this author's opinion if the design and execution have fundamental flaws that jeopardize any reasonably valid conclusions, the empirical research has not sufficient credibility and should not be published. This volume has a couple of chapters that lack in validity, depth and/or breadth to merit

serious academic consideration. The concluding chapter though makes up for this to a degree. By posing questions for future development of the concepts presented it brings hope that maybe a few of the issues and gaps present in this volume can be corrected and filled in by future research.

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Janne Kontio is a doctoral student at the Department of Education, Uppsala University, Sweden. He conducts empirical research in the field of education, with a special interest in the research areas of multilingualism, gender and embodiment as situated interactional practices. The working title of his PhD project is "Men in Blue – Language Use and Norms in Vocational Education" and focuses on Swedish students enrolled in the Vehicle Program who are being taught in and through a foreign language (i.e. English).